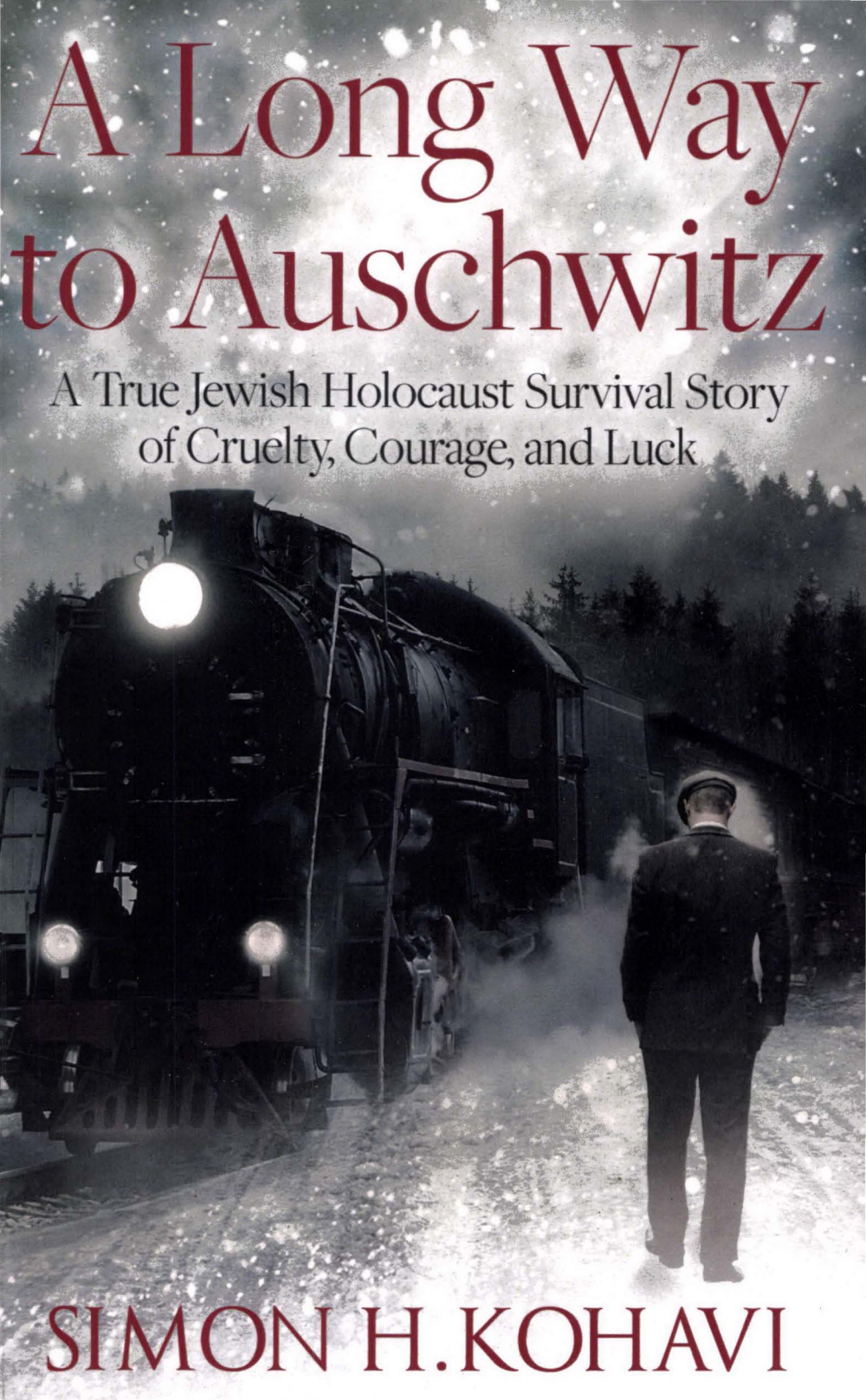
A Long Way to Auschwitz

A True Jewish Holocaust Survival Story of Cruelty, Courage, and Luck



SIMON H. KOHAVI

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Introduction

People who survive cruel wars and persecution are of two different types. There are those whose lips are sealed; they will not share the horrors they have endured even with those closest to them. Outwardly, they begin a new life, but inwardly their minds are in constant turmoil. My mother is like that.

However, there are others who believe that the right thing to do is to disclose their personal history even if it is shocking and unimaginable. My father was like that.

Over the years, he related anecdotes from his experience as a Hungarian Jew during World War II. His stories were of forced labor, concentration camps, rabid racism, and of heroes and cowards. The stories unfolded against a harsh historical landscape, but always contained a fascinating human dimension, and especially suspense - a great deal of suspense. All the stories had a moral, the essence of which was the need for resourcefulness, even when all seems lost.

About two years before his death, Dad agreed to tell his story of five years of the war. My cousin, Miriam Chenchinsky, the daughter of Sigmund, who is mentioned in the book, devoted herself to writing down the stories longhand over a period of several months. Words cannot express our appreciation and gratitude to Miriam for

her dedication.

In the twenty-three years since my father passed away in 1997, I have turned his story into the book before you, imbued with his constantly accompanying character and spirit guiding me.

The book is lovingly dedicated to my father and mother who created a new life for us as they overcame the inconceivable evil that had washed over them.

The book is also dedicated with awesome reverence to the dozens of our family who were not fortunate enough to survive. They will be in our hearts forever.

How happy we are to have known them.

Before the Break of Dawn

The war was nearing an end and the conflict was winding down. I was totally exhausted but giving up was out of the question. I renewed my energy with the fuel that had thus far saved me: belief in myself.

Towards evening, we were ordered to line up in rows of five. We each received a loaf of bread. We set off on in the freezing cold and snow. We had no idea how long we had to march. We did not know where we were going. Two friends marched on either side of me. We had been together, bound in heart, soul, and blood for more than four years. I looked back. I could not see the end of the column.

At the tail end of the line marched a gang of murderers. Their job was to pressure the marchers by firing shots at them. If the marchers at the end of the column walked quickly enough, the whole convoy would advance faster. If in the back they shot and killed people, their screams would terrify those ahead and urge them to move forward with greater speed.

Alongside the column were soldiers armed with submachine guns. Whoever lagged was shot and dragged out of the line. If anyone bent down to tie his shoelaces, he was trampled by the mass of thousands of prisoners behind him. Some preferred to dispose of their shoes

and walk barefoot in the ice and snow, or they wrapped their feet in rags. German terror dictated the pace. The soles of our feet were in agonizing pain. Muscles ached and collapsed. I felt I was walking on bare bones.

The fear of the gunshots and the unknown made my pulse race. I felt my heart beating at a murderous pace. There was pounding in my eardrums. My head was about to explode. I marched for five hours, then seven, and then ten hours. My body was falling apart. My mouth was dry, my body parched from stomach to throat. Another step and yet another...

Why keep going? Suffering can be ended easily. Just step out of line.

You can sometimes fall asleep while walking. I knew that if I bumped into something and fall, it would mean my immediate end. I struggled with my thoughts and concentrated on getting through the present moment...and another moment. All through the darkness until the break of dawn.

Later, I'll revisit the story of that night, and of those last days. First, I must start from the beginning.

Between Forests and Streams

Like the opening chapter in suspense novels, my story also begins in a peaceful place - my favorite place. To be precise, my favorite place out of all the places I've ever been in my life.

Imagine a beautiful home built of wood set in a village that was almost as large as a small town. The streams of two large rivers converge at the corner of the house. One of the streams overflows and roars all year long. The flow of the second is calm, and it reaches the intersection of the waters quietly and smoothly. They are from melted snow coming down from the tops of the high mountains that overlook the village.

The point where the two streams meet attracts an enormous quantity of fish, and rollicking children try to catch as many fish as possible without falling into the icy water. Each fish that is pulled out of the water is greeted with joyous cheering and sometimes with quiet envy. The house is my parent's. Our family has lived here for several generations.

Lisichivo

The house stood on the outskirts of a village called Lisichivo. Located in the towering Carpathian Mountains, Lisichivo belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire for centuries. At the end of the Great War, the First World War, new European countries emerged. The victors - the British Empire, France, Italy, and the United States - dismantled the defeated countries and established the League of Nations that evolved into the United Nations. The German Empire was required to take upon itself restrictive laws and relinquish control over certain areas. The Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire both disintegrated. One of the new countries that came into being was Czechoslovakia. Little Lisichivo was in the Slovakian region. Today it is part of Ukraine.

It was a high, secluded mountainous area, surrounded by forests and streams. The isolation caused residents of the area to live modest, unassuming lives. The view from every angle was amazing, but that was not the reason my ancestors had settled there centuries before. Since the Roman Empire adoption of Christianity, Jews had been persecuted throughout Europe. Christianity had diverged from Judaism and fostered a mythos of hatred for those who had remained Jews, encouraging the spilling of their blood. The Christian factions

that arose over the years squabbled with one another, yet they were solidly united against the Jews. Even in times of war between different nations, the Jewish people were always the scapegoat. Cataclysmic events such as the Crusades, economic crises, the conquest of territories and political revolutions rekindled hatred for the "other" especially the Jews. Forced exile and pogroms occurred every few years, each time in another country. Jews had to wander from one place to another, fleeing from one massacre after another. My forebearers concluded that only in a remote and secluded place could they live a quiet, secure existence.

From the Little Village to the Big City

I was born in July 1919, a year after the end of the First World War. The war's consequences were terrible. Nearly twenty million people had died in vain. More than twenty million others were disabled. The trauma compelled countries to take positions of political extremism. Germany, Italy, and Spain went in the direction of fascism. Czechoslovakia went in the opposite direction and a welcomed transformation took place. We found ourselves under Democratic rule, which treated Jews as citizens with equal rights. It was a novelty in a country's behavior towards minorities. But it only lasted a short while.

My mother Rebecca nee Kahan, and my father, Ben-Zion Isaiah Stern, were born into families who lived in the area for generations. Our family comprised three daughters and seven sons. The eldest daughter, Tova, was 23 years older than the youngest daughter, Leah. We were a large, cheerful, and cohesive family living according to the Jewish commandments. Dozens of uncles, aunts and cousins lived in the surrounding towns and villages. There was always somewhere for everyone – either as hosts or as visitors. Further on I will describe the experiences of some of my family during the war.

The most important thing in a man's life, according to Jewish

tradition, is the study of Torah, and the common practice was to send the boys out of the village when they reached the age of 12 to religious colleges called "yeshivas," My brothers and I were sent to a reputable yeshiva in the city of Pressburg, which is now called Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia.

My eyes were opened in the big city. I realized that I needed to expand my education beyond religious studies, and I aspired to higher education. I debated between medicine and dentistry. I met Jews in Pressburg who were Torah scholars and also renowned doctors, and I liked the combination.

Things began to change in March of 1938, when Germany violated the Treaty of Versailles and annexed Austria in what was called the "Anschluss," meaning annexation. In September of that same year, Adolf Hitler, who had come to power five years earlier, demanded independence for the Sudetenland, a region that was part of Czechoslovakia, but most of its residents were ethnic Germans. The then British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, signed the notorious political ploy known as the Munich Agreement, and events began to snowball. Backed by the signed agreement of Britain and France, which had also signed the agreement, Hitler began to dismantle Czechoslovakia and Pressburg became the autonomous Slovakian capital. The area where my family lived was made part of another Hitler ally, Hungary.

Together with the Germans and their partners, Nazi influences began to be instilled in Slovakian youth and many of them joined a Nazi-like youth movement, in the style of "Hitlerjugend" - the Hitler Youth organization. They began to harass Jews, abusing anyone who fell into their hands. The Jews of Pressburg organized themselves for self-defense into what we called the Jewish Defense. I was in charge of guarding the Jewish area of Klariska Street. We armed ourselves

with iron rods, and when confronted with Slovak rioters, we usually came out the victors. But one day, the list of members of the Jewish Defense got into the hands of the police. I was ordered to go underground, as I was in danger.

Nazi Madness Takes Over

Europe was going through wild, raging times. World War II broke out on September 1, 1939, when the German army marched into Poland and conquered it in five weeks, with almost no resistance. From there, the Germans continued to conquer Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands and more. At the same time, the Nazis opened an eastern front, intending to invade the Soviet Union, as well as a southern front, in the western desert of North Africa. France signed a ceasefire agreement and its government effectively capitulated. Italy and Japan joined Germany. The United States, hesitant to enter the war, did not intervene in the fighting.

On January 20, 1942, the infamous Wannsee Conference convened on the outskirts of Berlin. The topic at hand to be discussed by the representatives of the German government, were various strategies on how to exterminate the Jews. There were approximately 16 million Jews in the world at that time; 11 million of them lived in Europe. The conference decided on a "final solution to the Jewish question" and how to carry it out. The "final solution" literally called for the annihilation of the Jewish people - the murder of 16 million people merely because they were Jews. This was in addition to the slaughter of gypsies, the disabled, the mentally challenged, the homosexuals,

the "anti-socials" and others, whom the Germans wished to exterminate in order to "purify" the world. If they had succeeded, no one knows who would have been next in line.

In Slovakia, a puppet regime was established, led by Josef Tiso, who followed German orders. Tiso was a devout Catholic Priest and a Jew hater. He reached a hair-raising agreement with the Germans, according to which he would pay them 500 marks for every Jew who left Slovakia for Germany. There was only one condition: the Germans promised that those Jews would never return to Slovakia. The intent was clear: the Jews were sent to forced labor. Whoever of them did not die of disease, starvation or hard labor would be murdered. "It is a Christian act to expel the Jews," Tiso declared in a speech to the nation. "The Slovak people must eliminate what is harmful to them." In other words, his intention was not only to expel them but annihilate them.

These were not mere words, but deeds. After Hitler, Tiso was the second head of state in Europe to institute racism against the Jews and their persecution. In 1942, by his direct order, the first 60,000 Jews were exterminated in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. I will tell you more about that hell further on. This was the beginning of the application of the decisions made at the Wannsee Conference. No one had believed it until the Nazi madness struck.

The extermination of the people was led by the Slovaks with the help of the Hlinka Guard, the militia maintained by the extreme right-wing Slovak People's Party. Its members were trained in the Nazi SS camps. The Hlinka Guard wore black uniforms and gave the 'Sieg Heil' salute with an extended right arm. They acted mainly against Jews, but also against Czechs, leftists and against opponents of the regime.

At the end of the war, Tiso fled to Germany, was captured by the

US military and extradited to a reunited Czechoslovakia (until it was divided again in 1993 into the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Despite inexplicable requests from the Vatican to pardon Tiso, the murderous priest was sentenced to death and executed.

Homeward

In the fall of 1939, I left Slovakia and returned to Lisichivo. The Slovak police were after me, and I had no future in Bratislava. The Carpathian region had already passed into the hands of the Hungarians. They, too, were allies of the Nazis, but I hoped things would be better at home.

That was a mistake. Hungary, under the leadership of the anti-Semitic Miklós Horthy, had gained control of the region as a reward for the alliance it had made with Germany. Like Tiso's Slovakia, Hungary, too, swiftly and happily aligned itself with the anti-Jewish element of Nazi policy. Anti-Semitism had now reached our doorstep. We had become inferior citizens. Severe decrees were imposed upon the Jews almost daily. The decrees prohibited kosher slaughter, expropriated Jewish property, deprived them of business permits, and dismissed Jewish civil servants.

One of the harshest decrees was the establishment of paramilitary units comprised exclusively of Jews. They were part of the "Labor Service," which had been established in the decade before as a quasi-military body. In the early years, mostly political prisoners were recruited for service. But now, hundreds of battalions were established for Jews only, exploiting them by forced labor, abusing,

and humiliating them - and ultimately destroying them. They were deployed to pave roads, keep railroad tracks clear of snow in winter, cut down forests, dig fortifications and clean up minefields – bare-handed, without mine detectors forced to traverse terrain that was believed to be mined. The unfortunate ones among them were left on the fields to bleed to death.

The recruitments were arbitrary. A shop owner only had to recommend a Jewish competitor for recruitment, and his competition was immediately disposed of. Anti-Semitic organizations, led by Barros, specialized by such "recommendations" under the guise of supplying the needs of the state during wartime. Even the heads of villages "volunteered" Jews for the Labor Service to ingratiate themselves with the authorities. No one bothered to ask if the person was a sole bread winner for his family, or if he were educated, or how old he was, or what state of health he was in. Recruiters were looking for the young and the strong but also the wealthy and more mature men, hoping the hardships would kill them and their property could be confiscated.

In August 1939, recruitment began in our area. For two months, I managed to hide and evade it. I stayed for a short time with relatives in the area, but in October they caught me. I had gone to visit my parents, and although I arrived at night, neighbors saw me and reported me. I was 20 years old. Along with me, they also took my brother Bomi (Avraham), who was six years older than me, and my good friend Aharon Rosenberg. My mother had been worried that this calamity would come to pass, and she had already sewn warm, comfortable clothes for me. She also supplied me with a thick blanket of sheep's wool and lined it with a thin silk cloth so that the wool did not irritate my skin. This blanket would serve me faithfully for many months, in the harshest weather. Even when there was snow, and I

was out under the open sky. Half of the blanket served as a mattress and with the other half I covered myself. The warmth it provided me had a meaning far beyond the physical warmth. It embodied the essence of motherhood for me.

I would need that very much in the years to follow.

Between Rivers, Railroad Tracks, and Roads

We had no idea how for long we would be pressed into service. They drove us to a barracks camp near the town of Brezno in northern Slovakia, in the heart of a wooded region on the Polish border, on the banks of the Hron River. For the first time in my life I was obliged to live within a military framework. Transitioning from the status of a relatively free man to a soldier subject to regulations and discipline was difficult for me and most of my comrades. The new state of affairs brought some of them to the brink of despair. I believed I would be able to deal with the difficulties. At that point, I could not imagine that the hardships in Brezno, compared to the struggles to come, were like a summer camp.

We were 250 Jews, and a yellow stripe on the sleeve set us apart from others. We were made to extract large stones from the icy river and smash them into gravel to pave roads. All the work, including the smashing of the stones, was done with the simplest of tools. We also had to cut down huge trees in the forest and saw them into logs with hand saws and float them down the river. Our taskmasters did not consider differences in physical condition or age. We all had a uniform quota, and anyone who didn't meet the quota was punished

The punishments varied, one more terrible than the other. One

of the punishments that the Hungarian overseers were fond of was to hang the unfortunate "criminal" by his hands, with his arms and hands bound tightly together behind his back, so tight that his shoulders were almost torn from their joints. When the victim lost consciousness, they threw a bucket of water on him, and when he awoke they would hang him up again.

The old and weak were sometimes given a "break," and were not hung up in that manner. They were ordered to sit on the ground holding their knees and hugging them tightly to their chest, pulling their legs close in to the body as much as possible. Their hands were pressed against each other, and a wooden pole was stuck between the knees so that their legs could not be released. Thus these men was forcibly "packed" like a carton of merchandise.

In the Hungarian army, such punishments were reserved for rare, severe infractions. For our Labor Service groups they were daily punishments.

We all wore the clothes we had brought from home. Those in charge of us were minorities, mostly Slavs and Swabians, wearing Hungarian army uniforms. Some of them were criminals who had been released for the purpose of overseeing us. Most all of them waited for any opportunity to harass us, to abuse us and beat us mercilessly.

The officers were Jews who had converted. The fact that they became Christians did not erase the "stain" of Judaism in the eyes of the Germans and Hungarians. Even if the great-grandfather's grandfather had converted to Christianity, the seventh generation was still considered Jewish. Their advancement in the military chain of command was blocked when they reached a certain level, and they were sent out to command battalions and companies in the Labor Service.

The food was based on pork, and I, like most of the other

conscripts, kept kosher, and had to give up eating meat. When we went down to the village as part of the work, we could sometimes appease our hunger in a Jewish owned tavern. There, free of charge, there was always hot cabbage soup and potatoes, food they had prepared especially for us.

The work was wearisome. The nights in the cold huts were hard. From day to day, more of us became ill, and at night the barracks were filled with moaning and coughing. Getting along with everyone else was not easy, either. We conscripts were drawn from all levels of Hungarian-Jewish society: ultra-Orthodox and secular, old and young, manual workers, and the free professions, and from the rich and poor. Most of us realized the war would be long and arduous, and difficult months awaited us, but some were optimistic. We believed that the hardships would soon end, and convinced ourselves that they would return to our lives just as we lived before, alongside the overseers who today were beating us, and the officers who gave them orders to hang us up forcibly with our arms tied behind our backs.

As I have already mentioned, everyone's quotas were the same – the young and the old, the healthy and the sick. We who were young and physically fit, were outraged, and we managed to reach an oral agreement with the company commander: he allowed us to fill the quotas for the elderly so that they would not be punished. For the most part the agreement was adhered to, until some guard got drunk and forgot, and abused one of the weak among us.

I Ought to Throw You Into the River!

I was young, tall, and strong, but the conditions were hard on me as well. One day I was feeling feverish, and the Jewish doctor informed me that I had the flu. "My son," he apologized, "I cannot give you a work release. The quota has already been filled with old men and people suffering from tuberculosis who otherwise would not make it through the day."

I went out to work for the next two days burning up with fever, and felt I was about to collapse. I said to myself that if I do not get a sick day tomorrow, I will take one myself! And that is what I did. The next morning, instead of standing in line to go to work in the forest, I mingled with the kitchen workers. My absence was discovered a few hours later in one of the roll calls held in the forest, and there was uproar. That evening, back at the base camp, the captain looked furious, as he stood before us in the lineup. He demanded to know who was absent from work that morning. I stepped forward and announced that I was the missing worker.

The captain, a short, swarthy, converted Jew, slapped my face hard in front of the rest of the men. I could not restrain myself and I grabbed him by the shirt, swung him up in the air and said, "I ought to throw you into the river. But since you are an adult I will not do

that."

There was a hush. The overseers were in shock. The captain himself was stunned after I set him back down on the ground. When he recovered his composure, he ordered me to be placed under arrest.

Two soldiers armed with shotguns took me out of the detention cell the next day and were ordered to take me to a military trial at the battalion headquarters, a few miles away. On the way, we entered Brezno. I invited the two soldiers, at my expense, to "our" pub, and ordered drinks for them. I went quickly to a doctor who lived nearby. I had a high fever, and he gave me written confirmation that I had the flu. Would it help me at the trial? I was tense, and scared. What did I know about a military trial? I had spent most of my childhood and adolescence poring over religious books, so I knew not what to expect.

Two guards marched me in with a ceremonial 'left-right' march. I was set before the battalion commander. He read the documents before him and asked what I had to say in my defense. I explained the reason why I was absent from work and added that we were subject to constant humiliation. I told him about the hunger, the insulting yellow stripe, and the tedious work we carried out with precision. The captain had no reason to humiliate me, I said.

It is not certain that the battalion commander was impressed by my argument. What did, apparently, was the message he suddenly received on the field phone. The caller on the line reported that there was a revolt at our camp, and the recruits were refusing to work. The commander looked me over carefully and said: "I understand you. You may return to the camp without punishment, provided you are responsible for restoring the peace and order and make sure that the work is carried out properly."

I agreed of course. I had no choice. If I had refused, it might have

cost me my life. When I returned to the camp, the recruits gave me an enthusiastic welcome. At that moment, I did not know that soon I would be leaving there.

But who knew anything in those days? I had done no harm to another man, yet my life was taken out of my hands and my fate was decided by others.

Three months later, new instructions for us reached our camp: everyone born between 1916 and 1919 would be sent to Košice, the largest city in eastern Slovakia, and would be trained for the Engineering Corps. As I have already mentioned, I was born in July 1919, so I was among those going to Košice.

It was the beginning of a journey. How it would end, I had no idea.

Just before leaving, I entered the captain's barracks and apologized for embarrassing him in front of his subordinates. To my amazement, he got up and hugged me! It was a long, strong hug. "Son," he said, "if there were other proud and brave men like you among our people, we would look different and I wouldn't have had to convert."

Christian Politesse

Five thousand Jews were jammed inside two buildings with huge courtyards on the outskirts of Košice. They were all between 17 and 20 years old. We were thrown into rooms, 30 to a room, and that was it. From then on, you were on your own. If you failed to safeguard your possessions for a single moment, you would be left with nothing. Your knapsack, your clothes, everything would be stolen. And, if finally you found a corner where you go to defecate, you would not have a spot to return to.

You could forget about showers or toilets. Within two days, everyone was dirty and stinking. Thousands of people wandered the corridors and courtyards aimlessly. People were beaten mercilessly for no reason by Hungarian soldiers.

The chaos further undermined my confidence, which was already shaky. I did not know what was going to happen next. Where will I be sent? What do we do? There was no point in talking to the Hungarians.

Košice was a city of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, with a Jewish community of more than ten thousand. I asked for the intervention of the community leaders, and the answers we received were in the form of "Don't worry, it will be all right."

Aharon, my good friend from my town, was still with me. He was the eighth child of Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg, but as he was the first son after seven daughters; he was pampered and delicate. He clung to me for fear that only under my protection would he be able to survive. For me it was comforting to be able to share my feelings with someone familiar and kind-hearted.

When we realized that there was no one to talk to, we befriended people like us – those who loved order and organization – and collaborated with them. We arranged for guarding the room and our belongings, and our guards also alerted us if any gentile Hungarian was looking for a Jewish victim. We divided the little food we had among ourselves so that no one would go to bed without eating something. At one point we found a bucket and we helped each other to bathe. When no one was bathing, the bucket was used for washing our clothing.

On the other hand, there were also those who were looking to profit at the expense of others. They would sign someone else's name and take their two pfennig salaries as well as their own. They managed to sneak from the camp to the nearby bakery, bought bread with the stolen money, and sold it at a profit to the unsuspecting and hungry conscripts.

In Košice, as in Brezno, the Hungarians in charge of us took every opportunity to abuse and maltreat us. You had to be lucky to survive the murderous blows that someone suddenly decided to give to a Jew who stepped in front of him and did not get out of the way in time. Some recovered and some were left crippled. We later learned the reason behind this violence, which continued throughout the war. During their training, the guards were told that "the treatment of Jews must be consistent and in accordance with the Christian worldview. Therefore, all steps must be taken to ensure that Jews do not

return to Hungary alive."

An accurate 'quote', not in words but in deeds was simply: "Kill the Jews, but in a polite, Christian manner, if you please." Throughout the war years, I saw many Christians murdering Jews. I do not remember any sign of Christian politesse in any of those murders. In the Labor Service, in late 1939, those in charge of us still did not know how to correctly implement the instruction. Over time, their effectiveness as murderers got better and better.

Moreover, the intermediate way station in Košice taught us an important lesson on how to deal with the unknown. Not a little "unknown" as at home, when we didn't know how much rain would fall at night or how the cabbage crops would be this year, but a big "unknown" of the kind in which you may lose your life. That was a lesson in survival. To survive, a person needs self-confidence and a belief in his ability to cope with any situation. We learned that this was our situation for the near future: you are solely responsible for your own well-being. You will do whatever has to be done. It is your own responsibility to anticipate the dangers you may encounter along the way. Your mind must focus on the things that really matter, on the things that will ensure your survival.

The truth is, I was a mediocre student. This lesson stayed with me until the end of the war, but more than once I failed to adhere to it, and for that, I paid a heavy price.

But for now, we were still in Košice. After about ten days, thirty names were called, mine included, and we were ordered to report to one of the assembly fields. An officer informed us that we were being transferred to the city of Mohács. We were hoping for the best. Mohács, situated on the banks of the Danube, had always been of great importance. It was there, in 1525, that the Hungarians were defeated by the Ottomans, and for centuries others ruled the area.

World War I reshuffled the cards, and between the World Wars, wealthy families lived there. They turned Mohács into a splendid city.

We had been chosen to move there capriciously. The last names of all thirty people began with the letter 'S' except for one: My friend Aharon. One of the other men had agreed to let him take his place and he hoped to stay close by me. But at the exit gate of the camp, a name check was made, and my friend Aharon Rosenberg was forced to stay behind in Košice. The parting was difficult. We both wept. I never saw him again. I later learned that he was eliminated in 1941 in Ukraine, after contracting typhus.

Mohács

The punitive experiences I had undergone in Brezno and Košice had shaken me. On one hand, it was obvious that the Labor Service was tailor-made for the Jews. Only Jews served in its ranks, and the cruelty and contempt of the Hungarian commanders made it clear that the creation of the units was not meant to express sympathy and appreciation for us. On the other hand, they had conscripted us to aid the cause of Hungary in the war. Why would they want to harm us?

At that point I had no answer. I had good memories of Mohács when compared to the ongoing horrors and situations I would find myself later. To begin with, it was the first time we were given uniforms and made part of a brigade that included a number of battalions and a base headquarters. We were several hundred young Jews from all over Hungary and we took a measure of pride in that fact.

It was a pride mitigated by a great deal of frustration. We had not been found worthy, for example, of training with real weapons. As Jews, we were deemed "irresponsible," and in all the training and marches, including a showcase parade in the city, we were not given rifles, but shovels and pickaxes. It was demeaning.

Among the conscripts I met, there were young people from the

capital, Budapest. Although considered ostensibly as Jews, they were completely disconnected from Jewish religion and culture. In the eyes of religious Jews, they were considered assimilated, and if the Hungarians had not reminded them of their origins by means of forced recruitment into the Labor Service, they would have gone on forgetting about the fact that they were Jews. Most came from wealthy, educated families, and some belonged to bohemian circles. My encounter with them was stimulating. I had suddenly met totally secular Jews, free of any religious obligations, with impressive knowledge of poetry and music. Although I wished to study medicine, I also loved music. Violin playing had enchanted me from childhood, and I had dreamt of one day becoming a violinist myself. Due to my religious upbringing, that had not been possible. And now I saw that it was, indeed, possible eventually. The realization that the war was holding me back from breaking new ground in the fields of medicine and music saddened me.

These young men, who impressed us with their openness and free personalities, were limited, however, in dealing with everyday life. Some of them paid other recruits to do their work for them in jobs they considered to be debasing, such as washing clothes and shining shoes. They were also convinced that they would be unable to grasp the technical and engineering work that our battalion was to specialize in. They had never performed any type of manual labor of any kind and were not brought up like me. From an early age, my brothers and I were given responsibilities according to our abilities and our maturity. We worked in the flour mill and the family store. My encounters with these young people of the great world of Budapest was indeed enlightening, but I surpassed them in the ability to deal with the insane reality to which our lives had been subjected.

The military framework we were part of included parade drill,

marches, and theoretical studies. Of course, practical work was ever present: building wooden bridges, first with practice and then over the waters of the Danube.

The personalities of the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and the officers had a great influence on our lives. If the NCO was a racist, nationalist Hungarian, we were beaten and cursed as "Communists," It was true that some of the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution were Jews. As a result, the Slavic peoples all Jews as belonging to the Communist Party. Of course that was far from the truth. If the NCO the next day happened to be more humane or liberal, we would be treated like soldiers. The brigade commander, Colonel Butroimond, who was Austro-Hungarian, was a liberal and enlightened man. He gave orders for us to be treated fairly, and even punished sergeants and officers who deviated from his instructions. But he was not with us daily, and the various NCOs engaged in free rein to their attitudes and impulses.

The nightly inspections included examination of personal equipment, whose strictness depended on the personality of the individual commanders. If he were a racist or a sadist, he could easily find ways to satisfy his cravings. One of the favorite methods was the search for a speck of mud on the sole of a boot by rubbing a match across it. If a tiny speck were found, the boot would be thrown out the window into the darkness. When the lineup ended, the conscripts would run into the yard to look for their boot in the pile that was thrown from the windows and set about cleaning off the new chunks of mud from them in the middle of the night. The "Budapest" crowd found a way around this dilemma: they had two pairs of boots, and one pair was always shiny and polished even if they threw one of their boots of out the window.

Sometimes, if we did not satisfy the sergeant's whims, he would

throw all our things on the floor, disconnect the electricity and order another inspection in a few minutes. We had to grope for our belongings in the dark, then line up outside with our equipment slung over our shoulders and our mattresses on our heads. On more than one of those occasions I wore two left shoes, because that's what I was able to get my hands on in the dark. Afterwards I had to find the person in the lineup who was wearing two right shoes.

A Song for the Sergeant

Every Friday they marched us into the city to go to synagogue. This sham was intended to show that Jews were not prevented from practicing their religious ceremonies. On one of these occasions, we discovered we had a great tenor among us named Riesel. He trilled the prayers and hymns so beautifully that the worshipers, the members of my battalion, Battalion No. 2, as well as all the Jews of Mohács, were overjoyed.

In one of the night lineups, the sergeant asked Riesel to sing something for him. Riesel sang the Hebrew funeral dirge "El Malay Rachamim" (To the Merciful God) but changed the words to say he prayed that the sergeant would die on the spot. The sergeant, of course, did not understand the Hebrew and was pleased with the singing, and often had it repeated at lineup. However, one night, when he asked Riesel to "Sing me your sad song," the sergeant revealed he had discovered what the words meant, and he beat Riesel mercilessly.

Forbidden Love

Our battalion's proximity to Mohács angered the residents of the well-known city. The townspeople complained that to many Jews were roaming the streets, and after a few weeks, a solution was found. My battalion was sent together with another battalion more than two hundred kilometers farther north, to a secluded castle near the city of Komarno. The Danube flows through the middle of Komarno and separates it into two sides: Hungarian and Slovak. We were stationed on the Hungarian side.

Our conditions were once again exceedingly difficult, but worst of all was the isolation. Two months later, two of our battalion's men were caught on the other side of the city, which caused an uproar. They were summoned for questioning by the castle commander. He promised not to punish them if they revealed who had helped them slip out of the base. The two men told him they had discovered a secret passageway out of the castle that led under the river directly into the other part of the city. The commander decided that the passageway needed to be kept secret, and he ordered our two battalions to be sent back to Mohács.

Another event is deeply etched in my memory from the two months we spent at the castle. The battalion commander's personal

servant was a red-haired Jew who enjoyed greater freedom of movement than the rest of the conscripts. He began a love affair with a girl from a nearby town and went to see her regularly, until some of the town's residents who belonged to the ultra-right Arrow Cross party found out. They threatened the girl that they would expose her unless she cooperated with them and help them catch her lover in the act.

The girl had no other choice. When her lover came to see her she asked him to get undressed and the members of the Arrow Cross immediately burst into the room. They threw the boy into the street, kicking and smashing his naked body, and dragged him through the city, on a mad journey of abject humiliation. The residents of the town laughed and jeered, overjoyed at the sight of the unfortunate Jewish lad who was being dragged naked and bleeding through the streets of the town. The incident made two facts crystal clear in my mind: first, anti-Semitism was inherent in the majority. Not one of the townspeople tried to prevent the degradation or even to protest it. The Hungarians cooperated fully with the Nazis; second, was that we could rely on ourselves only. No help was to be had from the locals.

Your Homeland...My Homeland

The next location where my comrades and I were summarily taken was to the small town of Aszod. The central railroad line between Budapest and Debrecen needed renovation, and there were rumors that the town would serve as a major supply artery to the eastern front against the Russians. We were ordered to lay another track parallel to the existing one. The railroad workers refused to do the job, as it was exceedingly difficult and the deadline to complete the task did not make sense. So, who was more suitable than the Labor Service conscripts, who cost almost nothing and could be sent anywhere the authorities wanted?

The officer in charge of us in our small barracks camp this time was a tall man named Dushnaski, who was a believer in the carrot and stick approach. The stick was severe punishment. The carrots were improved food rations. The task assigned to us was to remove the existing railroad tracks, something that required tremendous effort. In addition to dismantling the tracks and the wooden ties, we also had to remove the stone gravel from underneath the tracks. The stones had been compressed under the weight of hundreds of speeding trains that had rumbled over them for thirty years, which made crumbling and loading the gravel a nightmare.

We worked with shovels and pitchforks that had eight prongs and within a day our hands were full of painful blisters. After a few days, the blisters turned into abscesses, and two weeks later my palm had hardened like metal. During our down time, we amused ourselves by pounding nails into wood, using our palms as hammers. Despite everything, we also wrote poetry. Their overriding motif was that we would work, work, and work until we died.

The grueling labor in the open air made us ravenous for food. Finally, long after most of my friends, I broke down and for the first time in my life ate pork, as the sanctity of life takes precedent over the commandment against eating pig and other non-kosher foods. I wept as I ate, after twenty years of observing the rules of kashrut; I was eating the forbidden meat to sustain myself. There was no way I would have been able to survive otherwise, under the conditions in which we lived and labored.

Aszod was a small and rather shabby town, but it was only 40 kilometers from Budapest, in those years one of the most modern and luxurious cities in Europe. Dushnaski promised long weekends in the capital in exchange for anyone increasing their labor quotas, and he knew what he was doing. Whoever desired a furlough in the big city put every ounce of strength into his work. What we did not realize was that as we set new levels of performance, they made them the new norms for production for the rest of us. I was among those who won the coveted vacation. The weekend rest and relaxation helped, but anxiety about my own future and that of my family did not provide me with any lasting relief.

The railway management took advantage of our presence to put pressure on the workers. "The Jews are better workers than you," they derided them, and the workers, who were mostly Communists rather than nationalists, also became our enemies. "You Jews,' they taunted,

"are all going to die. That won't change no matter how hard you work. We are the ones who are suffering from the quotas you set."

It was both maddening and terrifying. Who wants to hear that he is doomed? The railway workers knew, like many other Hungarians, that the intent was that we would not survive the war. We heard it said often, although at that point we had not yet internalized it.

Laying the new track was no less arduous than dismantling the old one and removing the gravel. The new trestles, which were of heavy oak, had to be placed into a bath of hot tar. After two weeks, the tar was absorbed into the wood, which made it sturdier and resistant to damage from weather for many years. But the stench of the tar made us all light-headed, and the embedded tar made the oak even heavier.

After laying the trestles we had to align them with the metal rails using a straight edge chisel. This required a high degree of skill. Any error in the location of the trestle or in the dimensions of the gap between them meant dismantling and laying it anew. It was painstaking as well as infuriating to our superiors. Indeed, conflict and crises arose even among friends. I discovered that I had the capability to set a personal example and lead the group out of crises. It was a sign of things to come.

One day, the Deputy Minister of Transportation arrived at the work site. He stopped near me, admiring my skills and work ethic, and began asking questions typical of a politician. "What is your name? Where are you from? What do you want to do after the war?" I was confused. I couldn't believe that this Hungarian really cared what I wanted to do after the war. According to the railway workers' notion, there was no future for me after the war.

I told him my thoughts: "I want to have a homeland as you have. I do not mind working hard. When the day comes I will use my skill to help build my state in Palestine."

My proud answer stunned the Deputy Minister. He walked away and spoke with his entourage and with the commander. Later, I heard from the commander that they had decided that I was an intelligent Jew. Ah, well thank you very much. I thought I was being a rude Jew. Sometimes the truth is considered rude.

During Medieval times, when professional guilds began to form, the fields of activity open to Jews were limited. They were allowed to become merchants and money changers, and in almost all European countries Jews were forbidden to purchase land and become farmers. They were excluded from entering a wide range of professions. After centuries of such prohibitions, the Europeans harangued the Jews for being money changers and merchants who oppressed them. Suddenly, the Deputy Minister became aware that the Jews were capable of doing any type of work. I was one of those who hoped and believed that one day we would have a state of our own like all other states, a country where we would fill all the roles ourselves and carry out all the tasks necessary.

A Solitary Cow

In the Spring of 1941, I was granted a furlough. We had finished our work in Aszod, and for the first time in a year and a half, I went to Lisichivo to see my mother and family. It was 400 km distant, but I made the journey happily.

What I saw there was depressing. The family store had been confiscated under the new racial laws, and my mother's main source of livelihood was lost. She had one cow, but until everything changed; milking it and making cheese was a kind of hobby. Suddenly, this solitary cow became her main source of income. And even that had been allowed only after the head of the local district had been bribed so that he would turn a blind eye and my mother's cow would not be drafted for the war effort.

The situation of other Jews in the town was even worse, and many were on the brink of starvation. The young men were recruited into work battalions and there was a heavy foreboding that the lives of the older people had no value. Every Thursday, police would go into the homes of the Jews and check what was being cooked in the pots for the Sabbath. People who went hungry all week would not give up their traditional Friday night Shabbos dinner as best they could. Seeing the bubbling pots of food, the policemen were happy to report

that the Jews had enough food.

I had come from outside, and I was appalled. The country that had drafted me into the army was demeaning my mother and my family, mortally wounding them. The feeling that something horrendous was about to happen was everywhere. No one could say what would happen, when or where. In the meantime, my furlough ended, and I had no choice but to return to the battalion and leave behind my mother, with only her daughters-in-law and their children gathered around her.

Yasinya, Deliatyn, Horodenka

After the furlough, I was transferred again. We were three labor battalions this time. We found ourselves in a mountainous, wooded area at the top of the Carpathians, near the town of Yasinya, where the road meandered east from Budapest, between Poland and the territory newly annexed to Hungary.

From bridge builders and railroad track layers we became road workers and mountain movers. In Berlin they had already planned "Operation Barbarossa," and our task was to prepare a roadway for the German army to go across the mountains. Hitler had finally decided to invade the Soviet Union, with the aim of conquering vast territories, including the capital Moscow, and taking over the economic and industrial resources of the communist entity within four months.

Within this megalomaniacal plan, our job was to create vehicle crossings on the steep slopes of the ridge. It required us to cut down hundreds of giant forest trees and move massive amounts of earth and rock. At 900 meters above sea level it was still snowing in March and April, so it went slowly, and the work was so hard that some men decided to escape. We were further restricted in what we were permitted to do. It was forbidden to write letters or receive packages

from home. It was also forbidden to go more than a hundred meters from the camp grounds.

One night, five men ran away, and it was clear they were planning to cross the Russian border. Our conditions worsened even more. A week later, ten more fled. Another week went by, and another ten organized an escape. They persuaded the Hungarian sergeant, who was a Communist, to join them. He held a key to the armory, and they took 20 rifles with them. Before fleeing, the sergeant defecated in a hat with the insignia of the Hungarian crown on it. He also left a note in his hat: "I leave this souvenir for the glorious Hungarian kingdom."

The main reason I did not run away either was a message sent to me by my mother in a letter that reached the nearby city and somehow found me. Mother asked me not to cross the border, because I would not be able to come back. She also managed to attach money to the letter. Besides, I did not think communism was a good thing for the world and did not believe that my situation would improve on the Soviet side.

In retrospect, my intuition was correct. None of "our fugitives" survived, neither did the symbol of the Hungarian kingdom. Later, when we met people from other battalions who had managed to infiltrate the Soviet Union, it turned out that most of them were sent to Siberia as soon as they were captured. Those who claimed to be Communists were sent back to Hungary as spies and as Communist Party activists. If they refused, they, too, were sent to Siberia.

The Sawmill in the Yasinya Forest

Our method of cutting down trees and filling in the soil were inefficient. It was clear that my and my friends' situation would improve beyond compare if we improved our way of working. One day I plucked up my courage and approached the new battalion commander with some suggestions.

The new commander was named Mihaly Csutoras. He was older than the officers we had before and had served in World War I. Moreover, Major Csutoras was unique in the setting we found ourselves in. He was a cultured and liberal man who noticed those who behaved properly or took initiative. He listened to my suggestions, assigned a sergeant to escort me, and sent me into town to buy a crosshatch saw. Up until then we had been using an old, ill-suited saw we had with us in the battalion. For few pfennigs we purchased a large crosshatch saw that was right for the job, although it was rusty and dull. We oiled and sharpened it and built a "sawmill" in a forest clearing. Our sawmill produced the beams and planks that made the work easier and more efficient.

With a thread painted black, we improvised a saw marking line, so that the planks came out straight. We made paint by mixing charcoal and water. The ideas were excellent. The fact that we Jews could

come up with ideas for harsh, complex manual labor was a complete surprise to the Hungarians.

The sawing required three workers: one stood on top of the trunk that was being worked on and pulled up the saw. The other two maneuvered the saw at the right place into the trunk and saw it into planks. The saw teeth were unidirectional and pulling upwards should have been easier. In practice, it turned out to be the hardest thing to do. Laying the planks and accurately planning the measurements of the road was also a professional skill mastered by us in the Labor Service. It required lots of strength. I soon developed a pair of muscular arms and was also puffed up with pride at our accomplishments. Csutoras rewarded us generously.

He gave us food in abundance and assured us that he would be responsible for our safety and security.

In the summer of 1941, the German army carried out Hitler's plan to invade the Soviet Union. We were ordered to stop everything and start advancing towards the front on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains. We crossed the border in the direction of Deliatyn and entered the Galicia region.

A Swarm of Wheelbarrows

The Hungarians and the Germans were not in the least interested in how the Labor Service battalions would manage to move. Allocating trucks for this purpose seemed to them excessive. The solution was somewhere between sad and grotesque. We were each issued a wheelbarrow, which we had to push up and down mountains and thus move towards the front. The wheelbarrow had within it our clothing and equipment - and of course our "weapons": the shovel and pickaxe.

Try to imagine hundreds of men pushing wheelbarrows like a swarm of ants forcing large grains ahead of them. We tried various ways to ease the burden. One was to tie the wheelbarrow handles to a rope slung behind our necks so that our whole body could participate in moving the load.

And yet again, we overcame the seemingly impossible. After a day and a half, at three o'clock in the morning, we arrived in Deliatyn. Before the war, it had been a resort town. It was now apparent that poverty was everywhere. The little that was left of the good old days had been carried off by the Red Army soldiers when they retreated.

The city was also home to large Jewish families, most of whom were Hasidic. When the Germans entered the town, the Jews' Ukrainian

neighbors began to carry out pogroms on them. The Hasidim lived in fear, lacking the ability to defend themselves. They looked haggard and miserable. We recalled with pain that we, too, had left behind by families without young men, who were at the mercy of the racism and cruelty of the local populace.

The hunger and food shortages led some Jewish girls to sell their bodies in exchange for something to eat. We were given a two-kilogram loaf of bread once every three days, and one evening, 'Y,' a member of the battalion, announced that he was going to buy the favors of a Jewish girl with his ration of bread.

He had his eye on a certain girl, who stood out in her beauty. At dawn he returned, dripping with pride, and boasting that he had indeed taken the virginity of the girl for a loaf of bread.

I was incensed. Sex traffic and trading favors for food were not uncommon in the maelstrom of war. But this time I felt - and I was not alone - that a line had been crossed. This fellow was proud of the act that meant the humiliation of a 16-year-old girl, one of his own people, our people, who were already being abused and suffering from assaults. We decided that we would make him pay for this act when the opportunity arose. And that is what we did, later.

We could not change the fate of the Jews of Deliatyn. By the end of that same year, most of them had been shot by their Ukrainian neighbors and thrown into dirt pits outside the city.

The task imposed upon us this time was to build a wide bridge over the Prut River. When we finished building the bridge, they moved us on, this time to the nearby town of Kolomyya. Severe anti-Semitic laws had already been imposed on the Jews there: their houses were marked, and they were ordered to wear a blue and white stripe on their sleeves. At first, the young people wore the stripe with a certain pride. The Jewish community in the city numbered almost 20,000

before the war; it was wealthy and powerful and had developed a vibrant cultural life. Very soon, however, the Jews realized that the markings made it easier to identify them, to make them accessible to abuse, and later, to extermination.

Here, too, the change took place in the wake of the German invasion, which let loose the Ukrainian locals' hatred for Jews. For us, the new situation made it clear that sooner or later, we, too, would become victims of the systematic annihilation of the Jews. We did not expect any real protection from our Hungarian commanders.

Our role this time was to defend military installations. We were even given rifles, which obviously would deter enemy attacks more efficiently than our usual shovels and pickaxes. At the same time, we prepared ourselves to protect the defenseless Jews. When we got our hands on a Ukrainian who tried to abuse a Jewish family or rape a Jewish girl, we would beat him. We were aided by the fact that neither the Ukrainian nor the Jews knew that we were actually Jewish. We wore the uniform of Hungarian soldiers, and once, in a Jewish home, a mother said to her daughter in Yiddish: "We have to butter up to the gentiles." She sent her daughter to bring us a cup of tea, and when I revealed to them that we were Jewish, the cup fell from the daughter's hand in astonishment.

A Sacred Mission

Horodenka, located 50 km east of Kolomyya, was situated at a strategic crossroads for the Germans. Day and night, arms and supplies for the Russian front went through that junction westward towards Krakow and eastward towards Kiev and the Dnieper River. Our mission was to fortify the road so that heavy transport could pass through it around-the-clock. We had to ensure that ammunition, food, and equipment reached the bloody front to bolster the no less than four million Axis soldiers who were fighting the forces of the Red Army.

To our amazement, we soon discovered that along with the supply trucks, other trucks were passing through the junction packed with Jews. They were mainly women, children, and old men from the Hungarian Carpathian region, the area where I had left my family. The trucks crossed the Dniester River and unloaded their human cargo in a field surrounded by machine guns. The people were dumped onto the ground without shelter or sanitation arrangements. The Hungarian guards treated them abysmally and threw scraps of food at them as if they were animals. A new anti-Semitic law passed under German pressure, required Carpathian Jews to provide documents to show that they had lived in the area for several generations. It was actually meant to serve as justification for deporting tens of

thousands of Jews who lived in the Carpathians - that is, us - to the middle of nowhere in the Galicia region of Poland.

Jews had lived in the Carpathian region, now part of Hungary, for centuries. This could be seen clearly according to the dates on gravestones in the cemeteries. But the German Nazis and Hungarian anti-Semites did not deign to go read inscriptions on the tombstones. Since it was not possible for a Jew to produce documents showing the longevity of his family in the area - his property was confiscated, and he was deported along with his entire family. The deportations began in July 1941. The question of centuries-long years of residence in the area was a mere ploy. In October, the deportees were gathered in Kamyanets Podilskyi, a few score kilometers from Horodenka. German and Hungarian soldiers shot them to death, and thousands of bodies were thrown into mass graves that the Jews had been forced to dig themselves.

The deportations of the Jews and the mass executions sent a shockwave through our ranks. Some of us had seen and even met with family members among the deportees. One of them was my friend Avraham Sheffer, who met his mother and brothers, whom he was helpless to save. Another friend, 'M,' an only child who spotted his parents among the deportees, approached the commander, and asked for leave to visit them on the other side of the Dniester. He swore not to desert, and he was given permission, but his attempts to save his parents were in vain. "You had better get away," they warned him, "before they make you join us." "M" was born and raised in Hungary, conscripted into the army, and saw the state lead his parents to their deaths in front of his eyes, on the false pretext that they were not Hungarian citizens. Out of grief and frustration, he became deeply depressed, and stopped functioning altogether. Others in our ranks also lost their minds. We did not know what we could do to

help family and neighbors escape. In the hours after work, we tried in every way possible to help them escape the specter of death. Some of the deportees tried to escape, and a few were very resourceful. In various and extraordinary ways, some women were able to acquire peasant clothing, impersonated Ukrainians and tried to return on foot to their homes. We searched for the fugitives in the fields, but we had a hard time contacting them, because we were wearing soldiers' uniforms and they were trembling with fear from the sight of every shadow that might be a soldier. It was only when we addressed them in Yiddish and whispered to them that we were "sons of Abraham" that they were convinced that we were trying to help. We gave them some of the food we had received, and hid fugitives in our huts. In the mornings, we helped them find hidden paths that allowed them to make progress on their journey back home. Many of them were later caught. There were those among us who suddenly saw our recruitment for the Labor Service in a different light. They believed that we had been recruited so that we could help our people in their hour of need. Perhaps it was thanks to these humane acts that some of us were able to survive.

There were six of us in my little hut. We squeezed together and erected an improvised partition, so that we could hide and accommodate women in the hut as well and give them a sense of security for a few hours. We were dedicated to the goal of rescue. I saw it as a sacred mission. None of the others in the hut had seen immediate family members among the deportees, but that did not change our sense of obligation.

Csutoras turned a blind eye to what we were doing, or perhaps he simply did not notice. If the Germans and other Hungarian commanders had discovered it, we would no doubt have been severely punished and perhaps even executed.

To See and to Weep

Two months later, we were told that we were going back to the main base in Mohács to complete our training as auxiliaries in the Engineering Corps. Only a few battalions had returned to Hungary at that time. We had witnessed the cold-blooded murder of people close to us, and we felt that they wanted to distance us from the massacres. Again, no one arranged for our transport.

We trudged back to the Hungarian border with heavy hearts. We knew that our fate was doomed, too. No matter what happens today, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, we believed with certainty that in the not too distant future, we, too, would be eliminated. We were shrouded in painful longing for our families in despair that we have no way to save ourselves.

Thousands of people slogged alongside and in front of us from place to place. There was chaos all around. We told the Jews we came upon of the horrors we had seen take place before our eyes, and we shared with them the knowledge that we were all marching towards the same fate. Many of them refused to believe. They desperately aspired to continue to be Hungarians, denying and repressing anything that might undermine that hope. There was no question of organizing a revolt. But the worst was yet to come. On the way to

the border, horse drawn carts approached us, packed with Jews. Hungarian soldiers had confiscated them from the peasants. Most of the Jews were battered and beaten women and girls, all swollen with bruises. These poor souls were caught attempting to cross the Dniester and the Hungarian border, fleeing from the killing fields of the Ukraine. They had made the journey with the help of a Christian guide, who took from them what few possessions they still had. The Hungarian soldiers of the Engineering Corps seized and raped them, even the very young girls. Then they beat them bloody. The uniformed officers allowed their soldiers free rein to vent their sadistic and anti-Semitic urges and joined in the abuse and humiliation of the helpless creatures. Then they led them in the carts back to the killing fields.

Seeing Hungarian soldiers in uniform raping Jewish women - Hungarian citizens - worsened the feeling of helplessness. When an opportunity arose to eliminate Jews, both officers and soldiers performed above and beyond the call of duty. I have been haunted all my life by the image of these women and young girls being raped, beaten, battered, and left to bleed to death.

A Brief Visit to Mother's House

Almost a year had passed since we left the camp near Mohács. The atmosphere at this point in the war was totally different. We had done well in the military missions, but our mental state was more problematic. Our journey had taken us on the agonizing trail of the Jewish people, two years after World War II broke out and the Nazis had started on the "final solution to the Jewish problem," We went through grim experiences in Deliatyn and Horodenka. We knew beyond any doubt that the intentions of the Germans, which until recently had only been headlines in the newspapers, were to be acted upon. Jews were being annihilated - men, women, and children, solely because they were born Jews.

There were still a few Jewish families that had remained and had managed to function, and they welcomed us with open arms. It was pleasant to be hosted in the evenings and chat with people outside the battalion and the military framework. But the problem endured. We had not found a way to get out of where we were and change our situation to improve our chances and our families' chances of survival.

Some of my fellows adopted the "Eat and drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die" approach. Others sank into a morass of

pointlessness and hopelessness, so much so that they saw no point in continuing to live. A few tried to make plans to escape, and desert, dress as a gentile, and somehow find work to sustain them in the village. Thoughts like these also crossed my mind, but I did not know how to translate them into action.

We tried to share our fears and anxieties. We told others, of course, about the Carpathians who had been deported to Kamieniec Podolski, thrown into a barren field, and shot. The response we received from everyone was the same: "What happened to the others will happen to us as well."

From the military perspective we had completed our training as members of the Engineering Corps, and we were sent to build bridges over the Danube. But the unspeakable ease in harming Jews also reared its ugly head in behavior toward us. The sergeant major threatened us early in the morning and again in the evening that he could eliminate each of us. One of the senior commanders, a villain named Kessler, enjoyed abusing us by submerging us in the waters of the Danube. The construction of the bridges required going into the river by boat, and then a descent from the boat into the water. The racist, sadistic Kessler toyed with us by pushing our heads into the water, bashing us with the boat's oar. He only released pressure on the paddle when bubbles ceased coming out of the drowning man's mouth.

At the beginning of 1942, it was clear to Csutoras that we were about to be sent back to the Russian front. As a reward before leaving, we were given a furlough and allowed to visit our families. I went home, about eight months after the previous visit. Back then the authorities had closed Jewish businesses, and financial hardship was widespread. Since then the situation had deteriorated even further. It was terrible to see. My mother, my sisters, as well as friends and

neighbors tried to pamper me, but their poverty and obvious misery was palpable. At this stage of the war even every Hungarian child knew that "Whoever is sent to the Russian front will not come back," There was a deep feeling that this would be our last meeting as a family unit.

Before we went on leave, they imposed a further deprivation on us: we would not be issued any more clothing or uniforms. We had to bring our own from home; clothing that would suit winter on the Russian front. Another sign - one of many - that the Hungarians had no intention of caring anything about us or protecting us. With great effort, my mother was able to find me suitable clothing. She also mended my special blanket, that mother's blanket that meant home, even at the most difficult times. And so, at the end of a short, dismal leave, I boarded the train to Mohács, heading for a frightening, and unknown fate.

Winter on the Russian Front

In the Spring of 1942, I was in a train along with many hundreds of other soldiers traveling to the front. From Mohács we rode to Budapest, and from there another 1,600 km east, to the killing fields that claimed the lives of millions of soldiers and civilians.

In Budapest, our friends from there boarded the train. Rumors from the bloody front had spread through the city. It was clear to the Jews of Budapest that this was a journey of no return. The farewells were heartbreaking: elderly parents, women and children rode in automobiles alongside the train to the border. Each time the train stopped, the conscripts got off to spend a few more precious moments with their loved ones. To a distant observer, the sight of a train traveling on the tracks with a convoy of vehicles alongside no doubt seemed bizarre. For the participants it was a journey laden with sorrow and weeping.

The commanders of the battalions were assembled on the train. Word was that they were planning ways to eliminate their soldiers. In the months to come, it became clear that the rumors were not unfounded.

We passed through places where we had been on the previous passage to the front. In the towns and villages where Jews still lived,

only a very few remained. The exterminations in the death camps in Poland were at their peak. Our commanders, except for Csutoras, made sure to mention this fact several times a day, whenever they wished to plunge us into despair and depression. Morbid feelings about the fate of our Jewish brethren gave us no peace.

Today, when I hear Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, or Hungarians claim that they did not know that during the war Jews were being annihilated by the millions, I can only laugh. If in a remote Hungarian village on the way to Russia, everyone knew what was happening to the Jews, then they knew everywhere. "Good" news travels fast.

We struggled with our innermost thoughts. How could we aid the war effort of the Hungarian army when it was fighting alongside the Germans? Why, instead of fearing the Russian enemy, were we afraid of our commanders and our countrymen? After all, we were fulfilling our obligations. We didn't dare hope to have the full rights of a citizen or a regular soldier. We dreamt only of basic human rights that were denied to us.

At one of the stations - I think it was Lublin - the locomotive was shifted to a siding to let trains transporting combat soldiers to race ahead of us. From the train window, I saw an SS officer walking with pretty girls who looked like they were Jewish. My friends said I was delusional. Accompanied by one of them I got off the train and walked towards the girls. We whispered the 'secret' code words: "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" and they responded "Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah,"

We stepped to the side with one of the girls to find out who she was, where she was from, and what she was doing there. At first, she did not answer in words. She opened her blouse, pulled out one of her breasts and lifted it to show us a tattoo branded on it: the initials 'JH', for Judische Hure - Jewish prostitute. She told us that she was one of

800 girls who had been selected especially for their beauty, their size and physical allure. These beauties were sent as whores to service German soldiers who were on leave from the front lines. Each such girl was sent for an 18-day shift, and then murdered. Death awaited them inside a truck, where either the exhaust pipe was inserted, or a shot would be fired, and the girl's body thrown into a ditch.

She spoke without emotion or feeling. I was stunned. My friend burst into tears. I asked her, "Why are you standing here and talking like that? If the SS officer sees you talking to us, it will go badly for you."

"Nothing frightens me anymore," she said. "I hate myself for not taking my own life. I am doomed, after all. It is a pity that I do not have the strength to commit suicide or do something else with what I know."

The conversation and the dreadful tattoo haunted me for weeks. The realization that I was also doomed to die in any of a thousand monstrous ways tormented me. What should I do? Jump off the train? Kill myself another way? To go on with a clear head towards the fare that awaited us?

I do not know if my inherent optimism is what helped me in those moments. Maybe it was the naïve hope that "It won't happen to me" or the inane notion that "I am needed and therefore I will not be killed." It is possible I was also influenced by my religious education, which had taught me that he who takes his own life will have no place in the next world; that man's life is sacred. "Whoever destroys a single soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a single life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." For whatever the reason, the fact is that very few of us committed suicide. Most continued with eyes wide open, heading to a dark and bitter future.

The Germans Lose their Temper

A horror such as the one revealed to us when the train entered Kursk in Russia, we had never seen before - and we had already witnessed many terrible things. Rows and rows of corpses hanging in the city streets – men, women, and even youngsters, anyone suspected of being a partisan was strung up to die. The lower body parts of both the men and the women were completely exposed.

The Germans wanted to deride the partisans and sow terror. Entire villages where partisans had been discovered were set on fire. The result was the opposite of what the Germans wanted. In the eyes of the Russians, this was a sure sign that the Germans were losing control; that their victory was not so assured as it first appeared, and they thought it may be worthwhile to continue to resist. A sense of German defeat was in the air. The Nazis aspired to reach the oil wells of the Caucasus and hold a secure front line in Stalingrad, but they failed. This news instilled a spirit of resistance and a stronger desire to fight the invader. The Germans, for their part, discarded any vestige of standard warfare procedures and massacred civilian populations with no compunction.

These developments were significant for us as well. Hatred of the Jews, which grew to extreme levels in the first half of the twentieth

century, originated both in Christianity and German fascism. Communism, on the contrary, was portrayed as the opposite of fascism and was atheistic. It would seem logical for us to defect to the Russian side, but this was not easy. Being captured would cost us our lives. We were with the enemy, and although we were supposed to wear civilian clothes we had brought from home. Csutoras had provided us with uniforms and boots suitable for the winter conditions. If we raised our hands to surrender, the Russian soldiers would immediately take our uniforms and especially our shoes, and this was a death sentence in the bitter cold that prevailed in the area. Beyond that, we still believed that if we continued to fulfill our duties we would be considered as necessary for the war effort and would survive. And so, despite the abominable sights along the way to Kursk, and despite the rumors that had accompanied us all the way from Budapest, we chose to stay with the Labor Service battalion.

The tasks assigned to us this time involved the maintenance of roads and the unloading of large munition crates from aircraft arriving from Germany and then reloading the crates onto trucks. To our surprise, the weight of the crates was light relative to their volume.

The Valley of Death

One day, in the middle of the work detail, German officers arrived and met with our commanders. Shortly afterwards we were sent back to camp, which was actually a large barn in a kolkhoz - a collective farm - near the city. The fear that something terrible was about to happen to us was in the air. We were convinced that the Germans were going to kill us all.

Instead, we were astonished upon our arrival back at the camp to be treated to a hearty meal. We were ordered to go to bed early, because at daybreak an important task awaited us. Our imaginations went into overdrive. Secrecy was a preferred tactic of the Germans, and it frightened us. I doubt that any of us slept that night.

At one-thirty in the morning we were dragged out of bed, given coffee and a sandwich, and loaded onto trucks. Two hours later, as dawn began to break we reached a cul-de-sac valley near the town of Novy Oskol. Our mission was both surprising and shocking.

The Germans had attempted to overrun Stalingrad in a Blitz, a lightning strike with massive force, as they had done successfully in other places. However, at Stalingrad they encountered stiff resistance from elite Soviet units trained in Siberia. These special units blocked the German attack, and the Germans, trying not to lose momentum,

had outflanked the Russians to make up for their failure. To take cover, the Soviet forces had encamped in a valley surrounded by mountains. The Germans decided not to storm the valley, but to deal with the enemy forces in an unconventional manner.

The lightweight crates we had been unloading at the airstrip for the past two weeks contained poison gas. German planes dropped the gas on the Soviet units in the closed off valley. The topography was ideal for such an assault. Within minutes every Soviet soldier in the valley was dead.

What we saw there was indescribable. The soldiers who were exposed to the gas died instantly amid carrying out everyday activities. The cook died with a huge wooden ladle in his hands. He had been stirring a pot of stew. The female secretary died with her hands still on the typewriter keyboard. It was not a battlefield sight with crushed corpses, puddles of blood and screaming wounded. The bodies of the victims were intact. Their heads were black from the hemorrhages caused by the gas. All the animals in the valley had been killed the same way. The stench was overwhelming.

The Germans were afraid of pestilence and decided to bury the dead. And who was more suited to such a chilling task than the Jewish forced laborers?

We were instructed to cover the bodies with sand. To make sure we completed the job we were provided with respirators. It goes without saying that we were all in a state of shock. Only black humor enabled us to endure the horror of the bizarre situation we were in. We joked about how we had become a "burial society" and when we were discharged we would be able to boast of a new profession.

This took place in July. The bodies had lain in the hot sun for about a week. The corpses of the soldiers were in an advanced state of decay. The horses' bodies had swelled to enormous proportions.

Someone had a brilliant idea. He picked up a rifle, shot at a dead horse, and cut the corpse in half. The Germans were also pleased with the solution as we could cover the bodies with less sand. Some of us were issued rifles to blast the dead horses with bullets. The others covered the bodies with sand. We were encircled by German soldiers. Their machine guns were aimed at us to make certain we would not use our weapons against them.

The work in the Valley of Death took two weeks. Csutoras had at the start immediately requested a defined area for our battalion, so we could prove that we were better than the other battalions. It was a wise decision. He himself organized our efforts and supervised us so that the task could be accomplished as quickly and efficiently as possible. The German in charge of the battalion was pleased, and very soon that would pay off for us. The other battalions were ordered to go from the Valley of Death to the Don River area, where they were to be human minesweepers. Most of them died agonizing deaths. We were permitted to remain in the Novy Oskol area, commanded by Csutoras.

A Hat Full of Seeds

Coping with the monstrous horror and the mass burials sapped our mental and emotional strength, and it took a long time for us to recover from the experience. On the other hand, other events occurred that warmed our hearts and revealed the character of the Russian people.

The distance from Kursk to Arkhangelskoya was 550 km, which we traversed on foot, marching 35 to 40 km per day. We carried a heavy load of personal gear on our backs; engineering equipment, company provisions, and the little food we had been allotted. For three weeks we passed through Russian villages. Everywhere the women who had remained in the villages, and who apparently knew who we were, what our fate and the fate of our people was to be, came out to greet us. There is no other explanation for their actions. They made us toasted bread and tossed it to us as we passed. The older women among them remembered the teachings of Christianity from the pre-communist era, and shouted at us: "My God, my God, how terribly have you cursed this people! How much do they have to suffer? Why do such beautiful young men have to suffer so badly?" As it is known, according to their faith God cursed the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus.

These villagers knew for certain that we were serving the enemy, and they understood we were doing so because we had no choice. Despite the hunger in the villages, they had a warm spot in their hearts for us hungry and battered strangers, no matter that we were Jews.

In one of the villages we were encircled by groups of children. They filled their mouths with sunflower seeds and spat out the husks as if they had a revolving fan in their mouths. As we were hungry, we asked one of the boys for some seeds. "I don't have any," he said, turning his pockets inside out to show us that they were empty. Then an older boy approached us. He limped and leaned on a cane. "Where are you from?" he asked. I said "Czechoslovakia."

The Russians had sympathy for the Czechs and hated the Hungarians. When the first child approached again with a mouth full of seeds, the older one said: "Give him some! He is a good man, from Czechoslovakia." I was sure the boy didn't have any seeds. He had shown me his empty pockets. To my surprise he took off his hat and offered me a hat filled with seeds. In my eyes, this was the essence of the Russian character: a combination of kindness and cleverness.

Csutoras' Oath

Our destination was a main intersection on the road to Stalingrad. The railroad tracks had terminated in Kursk, and for the Germans it was of paramount importance that the roads to the east be clear and open in all weather conditions. We were assigned a section of about twenty kilometers, on which heavy supply trucks drove 24 hours a day, and we were ordered to maintain it and the drainage ditches alongside.

We settled in for a long stay. For living accommodations, they provided us with a school house whose windows had been smashed, and next to it a bombed-out church. As usual, it was clear to us that if we carried out this important task properly, we would not be sent on other missions, that no one knew what they would be or where. We recalled clearly what had happened to the battalions that were sent to clear the mine fields. We knew that we had a golden opportunity, and we did everything we could to prevent our suffering the same fate.

It was a beautiful moment for our commander, Csutoras. He, too, for his own reasons, was determined to carry out the road maintenance as efficiently as possible, and thus to gain approbation. After we had settled into the school house, he ordered a festive parade, the likes of which we had never seen before.

Major Mihaly Csutoras appeared before us in his dress uniform - not in battle fatigues, but in the decorous uniform of a high-ranking officer in the Hungarian army. An integral part of the getup was a huge sword, a remnant of past wars. Other than the location and conditions under which the event was held, one might think we were witnessing a military parade on the main boulevard of Budapest.

Battalion No. 2 stood in full formation on the esplanade. Csutoras, festively dressed and polished, stood in the center after drill exercises. He drew out the huge sword and brandished it forward, back, right, left, up and down, exactly according to Austro-Hungarian protocol. It looked ludicrous. The Austro-Hungarian army had not been around for over a quarter of a century, and it seemed that Csutoras had totally ignored that historical fact. But the ending of the ceremony was unlike the beginning: at the end of the exercise, Csutoras held the sword in front of his face and proclaimed in a thunderous voice: "I swear by my honor as a Hungarian officer, that my hands will not shed your blood. If you do your work properly, I will shield you with my own body."

It was astonishing that our commander, a Hungarian Christian, would defend us with his own life. We saw what was happening in the other battalions. The commanders aided in the murder of their underlings without batting an eye. But our good surprise was a bad one for the other Hungarian officers. Csutoras had reshuffled the cards. The army had given the officers easy prey for beatings and abuse, but our commander had sworn an oath to protect us.

I did not understand what motivated Csutoras to make this solemn and binding oath. Did his humane and liberal character lead him to do so? Was he afraid that we would eventually revolt, and he was trying to dispel our fears and anger? The Hungarian officers were few, while we were hundreds of young men. Or perhaps

Csutoras wished to climb the ladder within the ranks and aspired to excellence?

We had been frustrated in recent months by the behavior of the Hungarians, both in the army and on the home front. Csutoras' motives were not an issue for us. We would follow him all the way. In the chaos in which we lived, he was our lifeline.

And his commitment were not merely spouting words. He did what he said he would do. Immediately at the start of our stay in Arkhangelskoya, he got rid of one of the junior officers who was a proxy for the Hungarian Fascist Party. Officers of this type had an unofficial duty: to eliminate as many Jewish conscripts as possible. Csutoras claimed he was lacking necessary qualifications and dismissed him.

Dear Wife, Do Not Debase Yourself in Prostitution

Three months had passed since we had again been cut off from our families and homes. We had no idea what they were going through. Once a month we were permitted to send a postcard that was pre-written for us. The card stated that we were in good condition. We had no idea if the postcards had reached their destination. We could not tell them about the tumultuous events happening to us every day, and we were ignorant of what was taking place back home.

We heard from members of other battalions that these postcards were another means of humiliating the Jews. In one of the battalions the printed text read: "My dear wife, I am happy to inform you that I am alive and well. Do not debase yourself in prostitution." Deleting these shameful words was forbidden.

Getting Ready for Winter

As he had promised, Csutoras made every effort to improve our conditions and protect us. We soon recognized and appreciated his capabilities.

The junction and the road we maintained saw traffic of various types of heavy vehicles. The German drivers, who had been on the road for many days were properly equipped for a journey of a thousand miles, and also had with them a huge number of jerrycans filled with fuel. But the drivers were hungry for soup and a hot meal. For such a treat they were willing to pay almost any price.

Csutoras ordered the construction of an improvised kitchen at the intersection and ordered us to clear the ground for a large parking area for trucks. A driver who wanted hot soup paid in the currency of those days – a jerrycan of fuel. The freezing German drivers did not mind giving the fuel to a hated Jew in exchange for a bowl of good, hot soup.

It was not a simple task to store the fuel. Csutoras knew he had to conceal it so others wouldn't steal it or confiscate it from us. He ordered us to dig an underground warehouse covered with wooden beams, with hidden entrances. The full jerrycans were stored there. From the outside, nothing could be discerned.

Where there is food there is appetite. Six pairs of horses had come with us from Hungary and were used for transport. They were beautiful animals with shining coats, but they made the Russian villagers laugh. They considered them delicate toys that would not make it through the devastating winter. Csutoras understood and thought of ways he could protect the horses from the approaching winter. Six pairs of horses and carts were equal in value to six small trucks. Our mission required the transport of dirt, gravel, trees, and other building and paving material. If the horses were incapacitated, it would be critical and cause serious damage to Csutoras' efforts to achieve excellence.

The supply of hay was also extremely limited in the frosty Russian climate. Csutoras decided as a first step to store enough hay to last until Spring. He remembered my successful ideas from the Yasinya Forest and put me in charge. I even got two assistants - my good friends Avraham Sheffer and Steinberg. He also gave me two horses, a cart, and a carton of cigarettes. I traded the cigarettes for scythes. We learned - and it was not easy - how to work with them, and we also learned how to sharpen the blades. The blades needed to be honed after every hour of working with them. For Jews who were forbidden to engage in agriculture it was an exciting experience and an accomplishment for us.

We cut huge amounts of grass, left it in the field to dry, then turned it, baled it, and loaded it on the cart, which we brought back to camp. Csutoras was surprised and pleased to see how much we had gathered.

For us, this "professional conversion" was wonderful. First, the work was relatively easy, different, and more appealing than road maintenance. Second, we contacted the villagers. The villages were nearly empty of young men. The women of the village appreciated

our presence and made sure whatever provisions we were lacking, were given to us. They gave us food, and we could take care of our friends and others. Their contribution was a welcome addition to our meager rations. But above all else, we attempted yet again to prove that we were useful and helpful. We hoped and tried to believe that it would improve our chances for survival. There was no other choice for Jews in our situation.

Feeding Staub

Csutoras, faithful to the oath he had sworn to us with his sword, took good care of the men while effectively leading the battalion. From time to time he would enter the kitchen without prior notice when the food was being distributed. He would watch what was going on and make comments. His unannounced visits assured that the cook would distribute the food fairly. His visits also guaranteed that the Hungarian officers would not steal food from their Jewish subordinates.

One day, when Csutoras showed up in the kitchen while food was being given out, he noticed that when Staub arrived with his cutlery at the food distribution point, he behaved oddly and did not take everything that was served. Csutoras called Staub out of line and admonished him. "Do you intend to stand in line twice, and get two servings at someone else's expense?" Bondi Krauss, the cook, came to the rescue. He explained to Csutoras that Staub ate only dry food due to his strict adherence to eating kosher foods only.

Csutoras was taken aback. He had suspected that Staub was trying to steal, and instead discovered a man taking less than his share. "How can he keep up his strength?" he wondered. "Staub does hard physical work, with a pickaxe." He ordered Bondi to come to his

quarters after work, and together they figured out how to make sure Staub's health would not suffer. Csutoras told Bondi to give Staub all the basic ingredients, such as raw legumes and potatoes, and allow Staub to cook them himself. There were few such commanders like Csutoras in the Hungarian army.

Peter Bulog Learns to Drink Samogon

Sometime after we arrived in the region of Arkhangelskoya, Major Csutoras was given responsibility for five villages. He was in charge of seeing to appropriate conduct of civilian life, while the Germans managed the military aspects. The locals had to provide food for the soldiers, who were in essence, their occupiers. The Russian men had long before been drafted into the Red Army and were far from home. The farms were run by women, and crops were scarce. To supply enough food over time, the situation had to be managed wisely and carefully. Aggressive and reckless management would mean that everyone would go hungry.

Every village had a 'Starosta', a village elder, who represented the community in dealing with the authorities. Above the Starosta was the head of the district appointed by the Germans. Csutoras sent for me and said that he needed an assistant who would coordinate with the elders of the villages and serve as an interpreter between the Russians and Germans. I spoke three languages: Slovak, which is awfully close to Russian; Hungarian from home; and German, which I had learned when studying in Pressburg. However, I was wary of the responsibility that would be imposed on me without my having any control over many facets of it and I was even more afraid to

have such a conspicuous role. In war, it is best to keep a low profile, so as not to be too noticed by some villain or other. Csutoras, who liked me and wanted what was good for me, gave me encouragement. "Your intellect is worth more than the academic diplomas of many Hungarians," he said. I told myself that it was important to come to the aid of this man who was helping us, and I accepted the job.

Jews in the Labor Service were not permitted to go more than one hundred meters from their work location or residence. To be able to move about freely, I had to conceal my Jewish name and adopted a fictitious one: Peter Bulog, a typical Czech name. As Bulog, I received a transit certificate and could move around anywhere. My status had instantly risen. I was given a mare with bells, warm clothing, and leg guards. This may sound absurd today, but in those circumstances, it was invaluable. Naturally, some of the fellows in the battalion were envious. Everyone else had to get up at five o'clock in the morning to do hard labor on the roads and I was living a different reality. I tried to do all I possibly could for them. I had access to food, drink, and equipment, and I did my best to share with my friends the good fortune that had come my way. The quantity of oats and vegetables in the battalion's kitchen increased considerably.

My living conditions also improved. I no longer slept with my comrades, but in a relatively spacious room near the stables. The new location was chosen for convenient exit and entry without having to go through the main gate.

Countless issues and problems of the villages had to be dealt with, and every request to Csutoras had to go through me. More and more locals knew that, and they tried to ingratiate themselves with me. Beyond the matter of my status, which obliged the villagers to give me respect, I was admired by them because I was Czech. They probably suspected that I was a Jew but refrained from mentioning

it. For my part, I tried to alleviate their situation as best I could. I valued them as human beings and identified with their suffering. At the same time, the change in my life was dramatic. From time to time I had to stop and remind myself that my release from hard labor was temporary, and that I was there under duress, against my will, serving an army that was slaughtering my people.

I worked in conjunction with the secretary of the district chief, and much of our activity involved rounding up food for the soldiers. The German commander, for example, ordered so many calves and cows to be provided, and was not concerned with how we would fill the order. The secretary and I had to find solutions. Luckily for me, the secretary, Ivan Petrovich Mikhalovich, was an intelligent and flexible person, who had remained in the village and was not drafted with the other young men because he suffered from a disability.

Ivan knew how to keep me alert and warned me of anyone who might be working against me. He took care of the local population, but also asked in every case, "What do you think the Hungarian reaction will be?" His favorite phrase was: "Let's make sure the wolf is not hungry and the sheep stays alive."

Of all the assignments I particularly liked the connection with the health clinic. There were two young women doctors and a midwife. Along with them was also a "Feldsher," a position created by the Russians. This was a high-level nurse who functioned as a doctor. The staff was too small to serve five villages, so Csutoras added to the clinic an elderly Jewish doctor who was among the recruits. I was his interpreter and working alongside him revived my dream of practicing medicine. The war had disrupted my plans. I hoped that one day I would be able to dedicate myself to this profession, a true calling. Meantime, I was privileged to realize a small bit of my dream.

Working in the clinic further improved my relationships with the

population. I made social contacts and was invited to their homes. I learned to eat Russian food and mainly, I learned to drink alcohol. Breakfast consisted of borscht - cold beet broth - potatoes, pickled meat, and cabbage soup. Alcohol was ever present in the form of a home brewed drink called Samogon. At first, I would vomit after a single mouthful. The Russians drank Samogon like water, while it made me nauseous and miserable. But I slowly got used to the taste and discovered that drinking helped me cope with stressful situations.

More than once I felt sick to my stomach in terror. I had to stick to my identity as Peter Bulog and I had to be always careful not to expose myself by words or actions. The Russians called me "Mironchik," which is their nickname for Czechs, but it was clear that they knew my real identity. I felt that the Germans also knew, but at that moment chose to ignore it. My inner tension resulted in terrible mental distress. Drink was a kind of tranquilizer for me. But I took things in hand from the start and set strict limits on my behavior. I needed to be fully attentive and alert so I would not ruin the golden opportunity that had come my way.

Blistered Feet

In my role as an interpreter, I was also assigned to the Feldgendarmerie, the military police in enemy territory, which was part of the Wehrmacht - the 'defense force' the German army. The troops of the Feldgendarmerie ruled over the population and hunted Jews and the partisans. Later, when the German army departed, the locals would deal with defectors. Feldgendarmerie officers could execute German soldiers without a trial, not to mention Jews or partisans. The soldiers and officers of the unit were extremist Nazis who adhered to every period and comma in military law and were the last to surrender to the Allies.

The interpreter's work put me under even greater pressure. I was frightened to death that they would discover that I was a Jew and execute me on the spot. It was clear that in such a case my relationship with Csutoras and his liking for me would be worthless. Once, the Feldgendarmerie caught a woman who was dressed as a villager. They interrogated her as to who she was and where she was going. She said she was carrying vegetables to a nearby town to trade for salt. They believed her and released her, but her joy was short-lived. A German officer suddenly appeared and shouted at the interrogators: "Why are you releasing her? Are you mad? Look at her feet. No

blisters. This is not a peasant. She is pretending! She is a spy!" The woman was further interrogated and severely tortured. She broke down and confessed that she indeed she was a spy. Microfilms with important intelligence information were found in the lining of her coat, and she was transferred to the Wehrmacht headquarters. It would be hard to believe that she lasted very long.

I was afraid that a sharp-eyed Feldgendarmerie officer would one day find out who I really was. I was afraid that at night, from exhaustion, I might mumble my real name or another identifying detail. It was hard to get to sleep. Despite all the benefits that came with the job, I felt that I could not stand it anymore. I went to Csutoras and asked him to replace me. I told him why.

Csutoras paced back and forth. In the end he said: "You are right. I will replace you. I need to think about when and how to do it."

He kept his word as usual. A few days later, I was transferred from my role of interpreter for the Germans. I continued to serve as a mediator between Csutoras and the villagers.

One in Ten

A Jew who had escaped from another Labor Service battalion reached us one day, bruised, exhausted, and starving. He had fled when his battalion was sent to the front, and now looked much like a hunted animal. That evening, he was peeling potatoes in the field, put them on a small fire in an empty tin of preserves, and fell asleep.

The little fire turned into a roaring inferno and set a nearby house on fire. A Russian reconnaissance plane that happened to be flying over the village saw the flames and the pilot thought it was partisans. He sent out a flare, which exposed the tents of Hungarian and German soldiers, who were taking cover in a nearby orchard. The pilot called in a Russian bomber that dropped three bombs on the encampments. Sixteen Hungarian soldiers and eight Germans were killed. We were sleeping inside a school building, and we were not harmed. But as usual, we were the scapegoats. The enraged soldiers claimed we were Communists, accusing us of telling the bomber where to drop the bombs. They tried to attack us, but Csutoras worked hard to calm them down. We were then dispatched to bury the Hungarian dead. The Germans buried their own dead.

A German officer decreed that the Jew who lit the fire would pay with his life, and the rest of us would pay by having one out of ten of

us executed. Csutoras fought the decision. Eventually the execution order was issued, but the Germans fired over the heads of the ""condemned." The man who had lit the fire was the only one executed. This was the best compromise that Csutoras was able to obtain for us.

Ivanko and Piotr's Tractor

Csutoras considered himself responsible for the fate of the 280 Jews in the battalion under his command. He was constantly worried that we would be assigned a more dangerous task and he would not be able to protect us and did everything he could to keep us from being sent to the minefields.

One of the ways he did that was at the daily lineup. Csutoras made sure we all were present at the lineups. He wanted to convey to the other officers that the 2nd Battalion was functioning as a well-oiled and efficient military unit, and that we should be treated accordingly.

At one of the lineups, Csutoras declared that we could maintain the road much better if we had a tractor at our disposal. As usual, he immediately took practical action and asked if there were any locksmiths in the battalion. Twenty conscripts raised their hands. Csutoras went to each one. He dealt with the volunteers in his special way, taking them to task. "You are a shirker, you don't deserve the job," "You don't keep up your appearance, and you are not worthy," but also "You are very responsible." It turned out that our commander observed everything. Nothing escaped his notice. He selected six locksmiths, gave them a horse, a cart, food, and transit permits, and allocated them six days.

Dozens of abandoned tractors lay on the sides of the roads. The

Russian army had sabotaged them during the retreat, the villagers stole parts from them, and not one was serviceable. The task was to assemble from several disabled tractors, one that was functional. But they failed. At the end of the six days, the delegation came back in shame, hiding their heads. Csutoras was furious. At the next lineup, he erupted, roaring: "You lied to me! You are not locksmiths! You have lost your chance to prove to the Germans that this battalion is essential. You will be sent to the minefields like the other battalions."

I knew he was telling the truth. Our fate depended on our ability to provide road maintenance. I had to take a risk. I stepped forward and said, "I humbly declare that I volunteer to take care of getting us a tractor." Csutoras eyes bore straight through me. He hurled the words at me: "Come to my office after dismissal."

I did so with great apprehension. Csutoras had calmed down by then. "Shomo," he said, "you are not a locksmith."

"That's right," I replied, "I will try to get help from the villagers."

Csutoras was stunned. "Why didn't I think of that?" he said.

"I cannot promise, but I will try my best," I said. That won him over. He said that my humility was commendable. I was given horses, an escort, food, and some equipment, as well as transit permits, and I left the next morning for the nearest village.

The wife of the village leader came out to meet us when she saw us approaching. Every unexpected visit caused a ripple of fear in the residents, and we, too, seemed a threat to her. "I'll give you whatever you want," she pleaded. "Take me but leave my husband in peace." I calmed her down and entered the house. I explained to the village leader why I had come, and he knew exactly what I was talking about. "There are many tractors on the side of the road," he said. "The Russian soldiers took with them the magnet switches used for starting them up."

I explained to him that our battalion might be evacuated from

the area, and that their situation would deteriorate. They would be hard put to find another commander like Csutoras and a trusted "assistant" like me. He thought for a moment and said he had a solution. Ivanko, a fourteen-year-old boy works with tractors. Maybe he's hiding a magnet switch.

The next stop was Ivanko. "I don't have any magnets," he said.

I had to pressure him. "I'll have to take you with me to headquarters," I said. "There they will know how to persuade you to help."

Ivanko's mother heard the conversation. She called Ivanko into the kitchen. Half a minute later Ivanko came back into the room and said he could solve the problem. He took us to Piotr Petrovich, an expert in tractors, and his mentor. They found a magnetic switch somewhere in Piotr storehouse, located a few more essential parts, and with hard work that took three days, and we had a functioning tractor assembled from several junked tractors. With a tremulous heart, I sent my escort to fetch some jerrycans of gas from the camp.

The fuel arrived. We started the motor manually. The engine coughed, barked, strained, and then cleared - and started working. I was flying high. Piotr and Ivanko adjusted the patchwork engine and explained to me everything that could be told to someone who had never driven a tractor.

I waited until it was time for the lineup, and when Csutoras was standing in front of the entire battalion at the parade ground, I arrived riding the tractor. I had stuck a green tree branch in the exhaust pipe, which was like a flag in the front of the tractor. Piotr and Ivanko wanted to hang a red cloth on it, as is customary at communist celebrations, but that was the last thing I needed!

The conscripts stood there, their mouths wide open, gaping. Csutoras, no less stunned than his soldiers, ordered: "left face" and approached me. He saluted me and proclaimed in his booming voice: "This man will save all of us. Not 'all of you.' He said, "But all of us..."

Cruelty is Love of the Homeland

The uncertainty in which we lived brought about rumor after rumor. We heard that labor battalions were being sent for policing missions in the forests, and units of the Hungarian army followed them in and shot them dead. The bodies were piled up and cremated, and the next day, the Hungarian commander filled out "missing persons" reports. The reason given was: "Desertion to the Russian army." Csutoras, meanwhile, urged us to continue to contribute to the German war effort. Up until now he had been right; his strategy had bought us time. But our inner turmoil was terrible.

We had seen enough examples of Hungarians treating Jews as objects to be "used and discarded." Our fear was real. In his trial after the war, which ended with his execution, Major General Ferenc Szombathely, the head of the Hungarian General Staff, testified regarding the Hungarian treatment of Jews in the Labor Service: "Cruelty is love of the homeland." Their contemptable behavior was seen to be heroic. Corruption became a virtue. There were two standards of discipline; the one that applied to Jews allowed anything; and everything to be used against them.

Considering the tractor's tremendous success, Csutoras decided that I should try to obtain another one. This was also arranged by

Ivanko and his elderly mentor Piotr. It was even easier this time, even though Ivanko realized he was helping the German enemy. To ease his conscience, he repeated to me: "Why are you trying so hard, your fate is clear. If you survive the Hungarians and the Germans, our winter will come, and it will kill you all." He said two more things: "We know you are a Jew... and the Russians are going to win the war."

The second tractor we used mainly used to help the farmers. The men had been able to sow the fields before they were recruited, and now it was time for the harvest. The women, who were left by themselves in the villages, did not have the means to transport the crops to the haylofts, and we helped them in return for a share of the produce. They gave us oats, potatoes, legumes, and other crops, and we stocked up on food for the coming cold season. To hide our treasure we built additional hidden underground warehouses. Otherwise, everything would have disappeared.

The Forest Engineer's Bed

Our fear of winter gave us ideas on how to keep safe. Csutoras suggested to the Germans that we place logs on the road to prevent mudslides coming down from the mountains. We also recommended marking the roadside with tree trunks dipped in tar. When the road was covered in snow, drivers would be able to see the route, guided by the black streaks of tar.

Everything required the approval of the Feldgendarmerie, a hateful unit that the Hungarians, and most certainly the Jews, preferred to keep away from. But the confirmation was given, and Csutoras decided to do the work in collaboration with the locals. He maneuvered between the Germans above him and the Russians below, and he amazed me anew every time he succeeded in satisfying the German officers while doing as little harm as possible to the civilians.

To construct a 20 km road bank required us to cut down hundreds of trees. Csutoras was given leeway to achieve this in any way he chose but decided to coordinate the work with the local forest engineer, who was responsible for all the forests in the area. And so it was. A wagoner took Csutoras and me to the engineer's house in the afternoon. We were to have dinner there and spend the night. At dawn we were to go with her to the forest for guidance on where to

cut down trees. The beautiful house was next to the forest entrance. The engineer's husband, a lieutenant colonel in the Red Army, had been recruited and she was left with their two small children. She was a lovely woman, in her early thirties.

Another forest engineer joined us for dinner. After the meal and the Samogon, he went back to his house. Csutoras enjoyed the food and drank too much. Emboldened by the alcohol, he started to pursue the engineer, chasing her around the dinner table. She eluded his advances, while I stood on the side, embarrassed. After a few minutes of the chase, Csutoras gave up in despair. He cursed in Hungarian, out of breath and panting. The engineer asked me to help get things ready for sleep. She offered us two beds and left the room. I helped Csutoras take off his boots and get undressed. As usual, he organized his plans for the following day, and then he fell asleep.

At night I felt a hand clasped over my mouth and a second hand pulling me up. I wanted to resist but felt that they were a woman's hands. The engineer dragged me to the other room and into bed with her.

Csutoras got up in the morning refreshed and ready for the forest. I was exhausted. I found a moment to ask her: "Why did you refuse Csutoras?" Although I was younger, he was more imposing in his behavior and manners. She was amazed at my question. "He's the enemy," she said. For me it was a great night, but it was a mistake. If it were exposed, it could mean the end for me and meant returning to hard labor and hunger. What do young men with their irrelevant questions know about women?

With the Help of My Friends

The head of the district in Arkhangelskoya had been a prisoner in Siberia for six years. A large, bulky man, he was appointed by the Germans because he was not aligned with the Communists. He did his job well, and was responsible, among other things, for the local dairy. His only child, a pretty and educated 18-year-old girl - who was also an anti-Semite - ran the dairy. Her hatred of the Jews was no secret, and with all her education she believed that every Jew, without exception, was a Communist. Any Jew who entered the dairy was whisked out with her broom.

The peasants who had cows were ordered to contribute some of their milk to the army. The dairy also made butter, cheese, and cream from the cows' milk. I was stationed there to assure supplies for the battalion and treats for Csutoras. The district head had apparently instructed his daughter to maintain good relations with me, because any communication with Csutoras had to go through me. The daughter understood this, and always had an extra ration for me. "Look what I prepared especially for you" she would say, though she must have known I was Jewish. I shared the products with the men in the battalion who kept kosher. Even a little butter and cheese were an important addition to the diet of those who refused to eat

non-kosher meat.

My position was complicated. Despite the many benefits that came with it, I was always aware that others might envy me. I made every effort to downplay the importance of my role, and to emphasize as much as possible that I was one of the group. I made sure to be with my friends as much as possible at meal times and the lineups, and I shared with them whatever I received thanks to my job.

The loneliness weighed heavily on me. Luckily, I had close friends, who helped me with my dilemma and gave me good advice. One of them was Bondi Krauss, the cook, who took care of the special needs of each of us. I have already told of how he saved Staub, who kept strictly kosher. Bondi ran the kitchen with authority and prevented the Hungarian non-coms and officers from taking from the quota of food allotted to us. Another friend was Dr. Marton, who had converted to Christianity. He was older than most of us, and I had to work hard to gain his trust. These two men were my closest confidants, and I consulted with them in moments of need.

Apart from them, I had an additional support group: the thirty men whose last name began with the letter 'S' and who had made it all the way here from Kosice to Mohács and Osiut and Yasinya, Deliatyn and Horodenka and the Valley of Death. There was Schechter, Steiner, Sheffer, Steinberg, Segal, the two Streiter brothers and others. They helped me relieve some of the stress I was going through nonstop. It was important to me that more people be involved in my deliberations and decisions to avoid unnecessary mistakes. In our situation, mistakes could have horrific consequences for the whole battalion.

Dr. Marton also helped me with health matters. I suffered from hoarseness for weeks, and I was afraid that if I lost my voice I would lose my job. The doctor came up with a remedy: two sips of water

and a few drops of iodine. It helped immediately, but the iodine accumulated in my body and created a sensitivity that was damaging to me in my later years. Who at that time even believed that we would be granted a long life?

How to Withstand the Russian Winter

At the end of September, Csutoras received a message from his superiors: the battalion was ordered to "stay there for the winter." It was awful news. All our efforts, including those of Csutoras, were aimed at their not transferring us to another role or location. When it turned out that we were successful, instead of rejoicing, we felt that the sky had fallen. How do we deal with this? The Russian winter was more powerful than all of us together.

Csutoras couldn't sleep at night; he was more troubled than anyone. I, who was close to him, could feel how much he was worried. He paced back and forth in his quarters. His lower jaw jutted out as it always did when he was anxious and stressed. More than once he approached his personal attaché Hartman, who was a gifted violinist, and asked him to play something melancholy.

One day he shared his concerns with me about "General Winter," and asked what I would recommend. It was flattering, but I felt it was too much for me. I promised him to think about it, and afterwards I couldn't sleep either. We were poorly equipped. Even those who had brought three pairs of underwear from home and three extra shirts had long since traded them for food or a casual love. What could we do?

Then, one day, it suddenly came to me that there was a way. "The villagers are living in poverty," I told Csutoras. "They can provide themselves with food, but beyond that they suffer from shortages. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Russian soldiers had fallen in the region, and it would be hard to imagine that the locals had not taken their clothing, equipment and even weapons. We would go on a collection mission and round up original Russian army gear. The villagers had their own clothing for the winter and giving us the looted equipment wouldn't hurt them."

Csutoras was in seventh heaven. We sent out a decree and a drummer to all the villages. Everything that was taken had to be turned in, and we warned them that anyone caught with military equipment in their homes would be prosecuted and might be executed for looting.

The results were amazing. The quantities of loot brought to the collection points in the village centers were beyond all imagination. We chose six men to sort the material, and I was in charge. Before that we had to transport the equipment to the camp with tractors and wagons, and repair what was required. Among the loot returned was currency stamped with a military seal and used by the Russian army. With this money, we paid the villagers who washed all the clothes in huge boilers. They wrung them out, patched them up and sewed on buttons. We dried them by hanging them on wire strung up on an area the size of a football field and positioned guards to prevent them from being stolen.

The day for distribution arrived. The mountains of clothing were sorted by size, and the battalion gathered in the parade ground. I, along with the six sorters, was given the right to choose their clothes first. I refused and said we would wait our turn like everyone else.

It was a wise decision, which prevented unnecessary jealousy. The quantity of clothes was huge. Everyone received warm underwear,

coats, galoshes, shirts, several pairs of pants - and we all had salvation. October was not over, and winter had already made an appearance. At times it felt odd and even funny that we wore Russian uniforms while working for the Germans, but in the conditions in which we were living, no one laughed.

Decorate the Trees with Jews

The fact that we remained in the field for the winter caused changes in the way of thinking and the behavior of all concerned. On one hand, rumors abound that the attack on the Eastern front was not progressing at the planned pace, and that the German army was being beaten. The Germans and Hungarians began to behave a little less arrogantly towards us, and their attitude towards the local population also improved slightly. We were all now in the same boat. On the other hand, the attitude of "eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we may die" had its effect on the German and Hungarian soldiers. This was especially evident in their adoption of life's pleasures, such as alcohol, food, and sex. They exploited everything at hand; without humane behavior and consideration was out of the question. The age of the rape victims and where the act took place were of no importance.

The behavior of the locals also changed when news arrived from the front. On one hand, the barriers between us almost collapsed. On the other hand, they expected Russian forces to retake the area, and feared that they would be accused of collaborating with the enemy. Not long before, in the summer, the villagers did all they could to please us and flatter us. Now it was difficult to get them to cooperate.

Our problem was only the tractors, which needed maintenance,

repairs, and spare parts. Ivanko and Piotr refused to cooperate any further. Ivanko's mother explained to us: "I am prepared to give you everything, but Ivanko is only 15. They will send him to Siberia. Please understand and leave him be."

We understood. Csutoras did not give up. He promised to let Piotr have his own private tractor. "A private tractor?" replied the elderly Russian. "And what does a Russian need a tractor for? A tractor is necessary for a kolkhoz or a whole village, not for one person." He refused; the tractors stopped working one after the other, and I had to store them for the winter.

Without use of the tractors, the rain and the bitter cold of the winter made the road work much harder. The ground became swampy, and those who went out into the field had to deal with kilograms of mud that stuck to their shoes and clothes. Traffic was almost impossible, and snow began to cover the route. Csutoras as usual, thought that now, more than ever, we must make every effort to maintain the road properly. His position did not change even though the difficulty was greater; the Germans had to be pleased. I had mixed feelings. I was glad that things were more difficult for the enemy, but I realized that my fate might be linked with theirs - gratification and dread simultaneously.

According to rumor, which turned out to be true, the Jewish battalions in our area and on the banks of the Don had diminished in number. Not because men were discharged and returned home, but because they were murdered. The Hungarians executed conscripts systematically, cruelly and with complete abandon. Yet the war, which continued into the winter, demanded additional manpower. The Labor Service headquarters in Budapest received urgent calls from the field for more worker battalions who would do whatever they were told. Their main job would be to move massive amounts of dirt and build roads appropriate for tank crossings.

In December 1942, an additional recruitment was called for the "Labor Service." This time approximately one hundred thousand Hungarian Jews were conscripted. Half were sent to the Russian front and half were sent on grueling missions inside Hungary. The "exploit and discard" technique was in full force. Besides a few individual commanders of the Mikhail Csutoras kind, most of the officers and non-coms were selected based on their extreme racism and brutality.

Hungarian commanders were rarely punished for murdering Jews. Only a small number of Jews dared complain about abusive commanders, and those were from battalions within Hungary. In battalions on the front, like ours, it would be suicide to protest treatment by a member of the Hungarian staff. The geographical distance made it easy for the commanders to abuse the conscripts however they wished. Colonel Lipot Moray, a senior commander of the Labor Service, addressed his officers before heading for the front with these words: "The Labor Service conscripts are enemies of the state, and therefore not even one of them can be allowed to return to Hungary. We must rid ourselves of this plague on our society by decorating trees with their hanging bodies all along the roads of Ukraine ... not one Jew should come back." His words - in free translation - were given as testimony by a witness at the trial of this high-ranking officer after the war.

More than 40,000 of the 50,000 Jews sent to the front in the December 1942 draft were killed. Hungarian soldiers sent as reinforcements to the battle in the East and who were also recruited into the Labor Service knew that they had little chance of coming back alive. The fear of almost certain death most certainly instilled an atmosphere of anguish among the Hungarian troops, and especially among the Jews. War is never pleasant, but the Germans and Hungarians at least had hopes of defeating the Russians... but as the fighting raged on, they saw that they could not defeat the forces of nature.

Dizhou

One day, men from another battalion told me that in a nearby village there was a cousin of mine. I took my gear and set off. It was important to Csutoras that I have a proper appearance as his representative, so I had the use of a mare with a sled and bells. The sled made no sound, so bells were needed. I made my way to the village and there I met my cousin on my mother's side, Dizhou Kahan, whose family lived near my parents. We fell into each other's arms and wept.

Dizhou had been taken from his house on the last round of the Labor Service recruitment and filled me in on what was happening to my mother and extended family. He was astonished by our meeting. He had not yet internalized the calamitous situation we were in. "Your mother cries day and night, reads the Psalms and prays for your welfare" Dizhou said. "I wish that she could see how you look and how you dress."

He also told me that living conditions, poverty, humiliation and above all the existential fear on the home front had worsened.

And he cried when he told me of his separation from his wife and two children. It was clear to him that he would never see them again. He estimated that his death was certain and believed that his family

would survive. Reality was no less cruel and evil. Dizhou himself was captured by the Russians and survived the war, while his wife and children perished at Auschwitz.

Despite the difficult news he brought, I was happy to see him. It was a greeting from home. A sad one, but a greeting, nonetheless.

"You are All Witnesses that We Were Not Afraid"

Hungarian defectors from the Russian front began infiltrating the area in early January 1943. They brought with them terrible stories about the magnitude of the defeat. Our spirits fell. We were afraid that the Hungarians would see us as a burden when retreating and would be glad to get rid of us.

Towards the middle of the month, the flow of defectors increased, and including officers. They said the Russian army was pushing the Germans back and were advancing. An officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel said: "Russian soldiers all have automatic personal rifles with a plate-shaped cartridge of 72 bullets. Ten men with such rifles can attack a unit of hundreds. There is no need to even kill them. The Russians just take off the Germans' coats and shoes. With temperatures of minus 25 degrees they die in a short time."

Csutoras reprimanded the officer: "How can a Hungarian officer not be ashamed to be such a coward?"

"Let's see you do it. See if you can last a few hours," challenged the officer.

It was a challenge Csutoras had to accept. On the night of January 16 at nine o'clock in the evening, in minus 25 degrees and knee-deep

snow, Csutoras took ten riflemen with him and set off. I could not get out of it. "And you, too, Shomo," ordered Csutoras.

I assumed he took me so that I would back up his word if he were to be captured by the Russians. I laughed inside: the Germans considered the Jews inferior. In the eyes of the Hungarians, we were both inferior and Communists. In the eyes of the Communists we were spies. This is exactly the "Jewish fate" in which everyone is against you and there is no basis for anyone's claims.

We set off. Every step through the snow made a frightening noise. The nearest village was seven km away. It was impossible to take horses out in such snow and cold, and we went on foot. Everyone was scared to death, as was I. Csutoras marched in the lead. People peeked out their windows. They expected to see Russians, not us. When I conjure up this sight in my mind's eye today, it's surrealistic: to find out if the Russian army is indeed close, an aging Hungarian major takes ten frightened riflemen and one little Jew, and goes out in the snow in search of the enemy.

We circled the village and reached the old church, which was built of red bricks. Stalin, who destroyed churches throughout the Soviet Union, for some reason did not order its destruction. Neither did any of the troops he sent. The ceremonial enthusiast Csutoras ordered us to stand along the wall of the church, our right hand on our weapons and left one on the wall. "And you, too, Shomo" he ordered. It was odd for me, as a Jew, to have one hand on the wall of a church and swear an oath. Despite feeling uncomfortable about it, I appreciated him treating me as an equal.

In his elegant voice and flowery, literary style, Csutoras declared: "You are all witnesses that on a cold winter night we are not afraid of the Russians. We marched out in the snow and proved that the enemy is not here. This church will be our witness. We will tell our

grandchildren of our heroic deed."

It was a bizarre ceremony. We went back to Arkhangelskoya as heroes returning from the battlefield. Csutoras said proudly to the Hungarian lieutenant colonel: "You are a coward and a liar. There are no Russians in the area."

The next day a large group of other who were fleeing arrived at the battalion with the same story. I understood that there was truth in them. The Russians were indeed approaching, and our days here were numbered. Two years before, the Germans and Hungarians believed that they would defeat the Red Army within two months. Hitler's plan was to capture Moscow as well. In early 1943, they realized that their dream had been shattered. The Second Hungarian Army lost 150,000 men and was completely neutralized. The price of the madness was terrible: 11 million soldiers and 13 million civilians were killed on the Russian side. Five million soldiers and three million civilians were killed on the German-Hungarian side. The devastation that the war left behind was enormous.

The Long Way Back

Something momentous was about to happen. I was sorry for having to part with all the good things that had come my way in the previous six months. Who knows what the future held? Despite that, I felt joy. Here comes revenge. The Germans and Hungarians were on their way to defeat. No matter what price I personally had to pay. I could not help but rejoice in the fall of an enemy.

I decided to say goodbye to my acquaintances in the villages, and I started with Khoroshilovo. In every house I entered I was received with hugs. Particularly moving was the parting from the girls and women with whom I had been in contact. Everyone wished me well. They knew that for me, a Jew, the future would not be rosy. Now they no longer hid it, and also expressed concern for their own fate. When I said goodbye to Ivanko, he asked me, with a sly look in his eye: "Meron, do you remember what I promised you?" Meron was the Russian nickname for Czechs. Ivanko had promised that General Winter would defeat us. "But you still have your pants on," he laughed. Piotr hugged me with his mighty body and expressed worry about the return of the Communists.

When I arrived at the house of the Starosta, he asked to speak with me. "Look, Meron," he said. "The day to repay the debt has come due.

I cooperated with you. When the Russians come, they will send me immediately to Siberia. I have no choice, and it is not fair for you not to agree. I will come with you and bring my only daughter, the light of my life, with me. Schedule a meeting for me with Csutoras, and we can talk about it."

When I returned to the battalion, I spoke with Csutoras. He did not hesitate a moment. Despite the complications involved, he said, we must take him with us.

For his part, the Starosta promised to bring with him 22 militia soldiers under his command as his contribution. They would come armed, he promised, on their horses and sledges, and would also bring food.

Csutoras spoke on the phone with his superiors. They ordered him to stay in Arkhangelskoya for the time being. The order to retreat would be forthcoming.

The roads became increasingly congested. Trucks moved in only one direction: westward. The army fled in a panic. The tumult was terrible. The next night I went to the house of one of my women friends and gave her the key to our storehouses. If we retreat and do not return within a day or two, I told her, all the contents are yours. To another woman, I showed where we had taken shelter in the trees, and so on. I thought it was only right to help the wonderful people who had helped us.

The remnants of the other Jewish battalions that withdrew with the Hungarian army exposed their bitter fate. Out of a battalion of about 250 men, only a few remained – the cooks, the personal servants, and other staff. The work of hundreds of ill-fated Jews, who had lost their minds building roads for tanks, was all for naught. At 40 degrees below zero, not a single tank could function. Everything was abandoned in a panic. Fear invaded the hearts of everyone.

On January 18, 1943, before noon, the withdrawal order arrived. As per Csutoras' instructions, everything was well-ordered and

organized, and everyone knew his place in the column. Our six pairs of horses hauled the equipment on carts. Each time a battalion of the Hungarian-German army passed by, we were pushed to the side. Jews, as usual, were the least priority. Soon, we could not see the road; the snow covered everything and there were no markings. If we were in broad daylight, order somehow was maintained. When darkness fell, and the cold increased, so did our fear and urge to flee. Our situation was dire. We just wanted to move forward, get away from the battlefields and get closer to home.

Towards midnight, a snowstorm began, and we had to stop. We had no idea where we were. At dawn we saw that we had wandered off the road. If we had not stopped, we would surely have been lost.

We continued like this for a few days, advancing warily, and keeping our eyes out for possible places to take shelter. One evening, we reached a village and took it over for the night. We stayed ten men to a house until morning. The battalion kitchen was set up in a central area and the cooks made us a hot meal for the evening and provisions for the next day.

On some evenings, we were followed by a Hungarian-German battalion. The soldiers expelled us, the Jews, without thinking twice, and took our places in the houses. The villagers took pity on us most of the time and helped us. It was incredible: the Russian forces had the upper hand, and we served the hated enemy. Yet they helped us out of human kindness. The fact that we had with us soldiers from the Russian militia also helped. On one occasion they showed us the way to the summer shelter for the animals, three or four kilometers away. There were roofs but no walls. Outside the temperature was twenty degrees below zero. We slept one on top of the other for body warmth. In the morning, whoever slept on the bottom had his clothes turn to ice and stuck to the ground.

The Pandemonium of Retreat

When a soldier goes into battle, his aggression is what governs his actions. When he retreats, his energies are all directed towards survival, at all costs. Selfishness reigns. People are seen at the height of their cruelty in retreat and they are willing to trample over anything and anyone who stands in their way. A strong and charismatic leader is needed to control soldiers on the run to enable them to retain their humanity. Csutoras was exceptional even in the difficult days of retreat. With his sagacity he was able to instill some order in the pandemonium, and arrange for the distribution of food, sleep routine, and the order of the march.

A few days later, the military authorities issued an order, according to which any village taken over by one battalion could not be seized by another battalion. Every morning, checking a map, I would consult with Csutoras as to where our battalion's next refuge would be. Then I would quickly go to the village and claim it for our battalion that very day. Navigating the route, traveling through the snow, and taking control of the village – all this I did on my own. One night spent outside, in the freezing cold without a roof, could have caused awful damage to the men of the battalion.

I slept in the company of the recruits, but always near Csutoras.

He made sure I was close so he could call for me quickly if he needed me. Eventually, I came up with the idea of searching out the house of the Feldsher, the auxiliary medical personnel. Conditions in these houses were generally better than in the peasants' houses.

In coordination with Csutoras, we required our men to keep the houses we stayed in clean and tidy. We did our best to preserve the dignity of the villagers. Although we had imposed upon them, for the most part they behaved with amazing kindness. I have fond memories of the Russian common people. Occasionally it happened that our men harmed our hosts. Of that, I will speak separately – despite the harsh conditions and horrors of war, there was no justification for this.

The night was followed by challenging days. The road was covered with snow and ice, and progress was slow and difficult. More than once, carts and vehicles of retreating units in front of us got stuck and the road ahead was blocked for hours. Inside the villages or cities, they made sure to clear the road. In the areas between the villages, the peasants had to be recruited by means of threats to open a passageway.

High, frozen walls sprung up on both sides of the road, and they were a trap. The partisans, with the help of Russian paratroopers, seized positions on trees and shot at the retreating horde. Thousands of Hungarians and Germans were shot, wounded, and froze to death. It was a monstrous sight. More than once we passed the bodies of dead soldiers whose faces were contorted with laughter. During the process of freezing, a person experiences hallucinations and many die with laughter etched on their faces.

One day a German battalion caught up with us and its soldiers forced us to wear yellow ribbons on both sleeves. Their plot was devilish: they had marked us as Jews and marched in between us

with us serving as their defensive wall. Communist partisans, they thought, would not shoot at Jews and so they, too, would be saved. This was unfounded hearsay. The partisans shot at anyone retreating, and did not differentiate between Hungarians or Germans, Christians, or Jews.

The Plague of Lice

In every house where we stayed, in every village, there had been others before us. Bathing options were limited, and over time we were all contaminated with lice. It was a terrible nuisance. We suffered from incessant itching and the humiliation that comes with lice infestation. Worse, there was the danger posed by diseases such as typhus, which are transmitted by lice. In the evenings we would sit and joke. What else could we do? Each one of us in turn would stick a hand inside his clothing, pluck some lice out of his body, and ask: "How much do you have to give me for these lice?"

The plague hit not only us, but also the horses. If we leaned on a horse while waiting, due to fatigue, a herd of lice immediately migrated to us from the animal. At first it was amusing and strange to see a man and a horse rubbing against each other to alleviate the pain. In the retreat, we quickly got used to such strange sights.

At a certain point, Csutoras ordered a disinfection operation. We were exhausted from the meandering road, and we found a village that looked like it could house us for more than a single night. The next morning we washed all our clothes in huge cauldrons, and we all bathed despite the cold, rubbing and cleaning. It only helped for a few days, because the horses did not bathe and the lice flew from them to us, and all our hard cleaning and scrubbing didn't mean a thing.

Ingratitude

There was also a case of ingratitude.

We were staying a few days in the house of a kind-hearted Russian peasant, who went out of her way to be kind to us. Her daughters also did their best to make our stay in the house pleasant. The mother took care of our clothes, and washed them, and tried to do all she could to provide for us the best she could with her limited resources. She was afraid of only one thing, begging her daughters not to "get pregnant."

After a few days we continued on our way. On the evening of the same day, 'M' invited all his friends to a "party." He was one of six of us who had stayed with the peasant woman, and at the "party" we dined on food much more ample and varied than our meager rations. "Where did you get the piglet you are roasting on the fire?" we asked 'M.'

It turned out that shortly before leaving the house in which we had taken refuge, he had sneaked into the hiding place where the woman had kept the only piglet she had left after the Germans and Hungarians had taken everything else. It was to help her, and her daughters get through the winter. He shoved a wet rag into the piglet's mouth, so that its squeals would not be heard, then slaughtered it and took

it with him on the road.

We were stunned. "How could you do that despicable thing to a woman who did everything she could to help you. You treated her like a pig. She knows that we were Jews and will tell everyone how we gave her evil for good. You stained Judaism." But we did not just shout at him. We decided to make him pay for what he did. Such behavior could not possibly go without punishment. Eventually 'M' did pay for what he did. I will tell you about that later.

There was also another salacious affair: the Starosta's daughter was, as I have said, rabidly anti-Semitic and arrogant. Her behavior disgusted me so much that I wanted her punished. One evening, I told the Hungarian sergeant major that the girl, according to what I had heard, was still a virgin. His eyes lit up. He ordered me to make sure he slept close by and forced himself on her night after night. Every morning he also found it appropriate to let me know that he was incredibly pleased with the arrangement. It was horrible, and I was partner to that horror, I confess. I realized that we, too, could be evil.

After some time, the Starosta came to me in a rage, crying. "What have you done to me?" he said, "How could you? I did all I could for you, heart and soul, and now she is pregnant! I am going to complain to your superiors!"

I came to Csutoras feeling contrite. His lower lip protruded, which testified to the intensity of his anger. He apologized to the Starosta, called in the sergeant major in and shouted at him. "In a few months you were to be promoted," he told him. "You can forget about that now." The admonished sergeant major left the room. On the way out, he managed to utter: "It was worth it."

A few days passed, and the Starosta came to Csutoras: "I have decided to leave. I am neither Hungarian nor German. We will stay

in one of the villages and find someone to help my daughter have an abortion. They will probably send me to Siberia, but my daughter may be able to rebuild her life."

We left them behind and continued on our way. My feelings of guilt feelings remained with me.

The militiamen with their horses and weapons stayed with us. It was not a simple matter. The militiamen with their firearms could easily overwhelm us. They could eliminate us or make us do as they pleased. If the Starosta was with them, he controlled them. Now, what guarantee did we have that they would not revolt against us?

I shared my concerns with Csutoras. Only then did he think about it, and he looked shocked: "You are so smart you could be a major general and not just a minor Hungarian officer. How could I not think about that?"

The next day a lineup was held. The militiamen also participated. Csutoras announced that in accordance with instructions from above, he must confiscate all the weapons of the militias for the war effort. Having no choice they surrendered their weapons. A few more days passed, and they concluded that they had no status or "sharpness to their weapons" and there was no point in their withdrawing with us. They were told that their horses and sleds were also being confiscated. They did not protest. We continued our way, and the militiamen were left behind in one of the villages.

Horses, too, Need to Eat

The 22 horses and sleds that were suddenly at our disposal was a tremendous change for the better. Some of us became wagon drivers. The heavy loads were loaded on the sleds, and it became much easier to travel. However, the horses also suffered from the cold. When a horse feels unable to continue, he sits back down on his hind legs, and this is his way of declaring 'I am finished'. From that moment on, nothing will help. Even if you light a fire under him, he will not get up. Along the way, we saw horses that had been shot, still hitched to carts with all their contents. They were abandoned by the retreating horde, and someone among them at least rewarded them for their efforts and spared them the torment of freezing to death.

I thought to myself how things happen in such a strange way. How, from a meeting like that of the Starosta, who only wanted to take care of his daughter, we obtained horses that unalterably improved our situation and our chances for survival. Those who had contracted typhus were loaded onto the sleds and we did not have to abandon them or linger because of them. This was another reason that Battalion No. 2 survived almost intact, while only a few survived from other battalions.

But problems also arose. First, how do we find food for the horses?

Second, units of the Hungarian army could have envied our horses and confiscated them. We endeavored to separate them and hide them among us, but it is not easy to hide 22 horses. During the day it was possible because of the commotion and congestion on the roads. In the evenings, in the villages, we had to maneuver things so that the horses would be scattered, and no one would notice them.

Csutoras made us responsible for obtaining feed and grain. One evening, we went out with some sledges, and parked them near a large warehouse where the German army stored sacks of grain. I had with me a few bottles of hard liquor. I gave the guards a glass, and then another...and another, while we drank tea. The guards were older German reservists and were apathetic. When we managed to get them drunk, we loaded sacks of fodder onto the sledges, and went back to where we had come from.

The Value of a Cup of Salt

One morning, when the road was blocked, I went out to the fields some distance away from the convoy to relieve myself. Suddenly, I saw something protrude from the pile of dry hay next to me. I put my hand in and discovered a cloth bag that someone had hidden there. In addition to my rifle, I always hid a knife to use as a personal weapon. The Jewish Labor Force conscripts were not allowed to carry weapons of any kind, but Csutoras allowed me to carry a rifle thanks to the jobs I held, and I also added a knife. I was afraid I would find myself in a face-to-face confrontation, and I wanted to have a convenient weapon.

I cut a small hole in the sack with the knife, hoping it contained sugar. Instead, it was full of salt, and salt was worth even more than sugar in those days and under those conditions. Russian foods require a large amount of salt for pickling and storage, and in war salt was a means of payment. You could buy anything with it - from fruits and vegetables to the favors of a woman. I called three of my friends and we loaded the sack on my sled. After that day, anyone of my friends who needed to buy something in the village came to ask me for some salt.

One night we came to a farmer's house and found four beautiful

young girls there. They were all dressed in a similar way and spoke the jargon of village language. Two of them were different. Compared to the others, their conduct was more refined. They kept to themselves and were less free in their behavior.

In the evening, I went out to the sled and brought in two cups full of salt. A cup was a unit of weight in Russia. My hosts were overjoyed. The next morning when it was time to leave and I was alone, one of the two more refined girls approached me in tears: "We know you are Jews. My sister and I are also Jewish. Our parents were murdered and only we are left. We came here in the summer and worked in the fields and the cowshed. We did all we could to conceal our identity from the woman and her two daughters - anything to survive." I felt that moment the urge to hug her, and I think she felt it, too. I saw the emotion in her eyes. We both held back. It was the right thing to do. It was forbidden to take risks and betray the girls' roots.

I went to the sled, took out a large amount of salt and gave it to the girl. It was as if I had gained a place in heaven alongside the angels. The girl would surely improve her status with the farmer in whose house she was living. Perhaps the salt would help save the lives of the two sisters.

Italian Night

The situation got worse as we continued our journey. Romanian and Italian military units also were on the same road. The two countries were allies of the Germans just like the Hungarians, only they did not invent an extermination mechanism for Jews cynically called the Labor Service. Finding suitable warm accommodations was now much more difficult. The Hungarian forces most often respected the order according to which the battalion to first occupy a village could stay there overnight. The Germans, without a second thought, would throw anyone out who had seized a village before them. The Italians and Romanians were not as insolent, but our needs did not interest them.

I spent one night in the company of Italian soldiers. They were generous and cordial, completely different from the Germans, and we had been told beforehand that they loved to eat cat meat. We also heard they had a special method of skinning the cat completely. The Russian farmer whose house we were in knew that her cat was in danger and managed to hide it before the Italians entered the house.

We liked hearing the Italians curse Hitler, who had dragged them and the whole of Europe into the nightmare of a bloody war. "Hitler Kaput," they said.

Bury Them and Keep Going

The temperature was 25 degrees below zero when we began the retreat. It was hard for everyone, and the Hungarians and Germans were concerned with saving their own skins. Hardly anyone bothered with us. We were just Jews.

After three weeks, when we were already far from the front, things changed. The Germans, who had been as fearful as mice of Russian revenge, once again became swaggering and arrogant. The beast within them burst out. They ordered the Hungarians to restrict the withdrawal of the Jewish battalions so that we would be left behind and be easy prey for the Russians.

Our people were lice-infested, exhausted, and sick. The first to suffer were the older ones among us, the engineers and doctors who had joined us. Later, we had to leave them behind in the villages we passed through. Others died on the way. We buried them and kept going.

Medications were practically non-existent. Obtaining effective German medicines was particularly difficult. The most sought-after item was a new antibiotic called Ultraseptil, which was a type of sulfa. It had not been issued to the Jewish battalion, but we managed to barter for it and saved some patients.

Give Me a Child

On February 12, 1943, we reached the outskirts of the town of Sumy and settled in a small village. Three hundred km of a grueling journey in swampy snow and debilitating cold, were behind us. Sumy was located at a railway junction that led to Moscow, Stalingrad, and southern Russia, and served as a logistics center. Trains arrived from all over Europe, filled with arms and food, and from there the weapons and other provisions went on to the forces at the front. A main German army headquarters there played a key role in the conduct of the battles. We organized ourselves for the night. As usual, Csutoras made sure I was housed close by his quarters. In the meantime, he was summoned to the Hungarian army headquarters in Sumy. It was a sign that the link between the battalions was renewed. The disorder that had reigned during the panicky retreat was about to come to an end. Csutoras returned a few hours later and went to bed.

I spent the evening and the night - one of the most exhilarating in my life - in a Ukrainian household. An older woman and a girl who could have been her daughter lived there, but when I asked the young woman if she was her mother, she replied: "More than a mother." She was 28 years old, a teacher by profession, educated and very pretty. She spent the whole evening trying to convince me not

to enter Sumy. "Jews do not make it out of Sumy alive," she said.

With endless patience she entreated me, begging me to avoid the city. She spoke of Nazi ideology and the systematic extermination of the Jews, appealing to my intellect - and when that did not work, she worked on my feelings. She urged me to leave the battalion and promised to hide me and take care of my needs. When she saw that I was not convinced, she asked me to at least leave a child behind. She was willing to raise him because she had taken my measure. It was clear to her that I was a Jew. And she knew the nature and character of Jews. When the day comes, she would tell my son that his father was a Jew.

I did not sleep for a single moment that night. I did not respond to her pleas, but what she said had placed a heavy weight on my thoughts and mood. Her sincere attempts at persuasion had seeped into the depths of my body and soul. At an early stage of the war I decided to be careful and not impregnate a woman with child. The fate of Jews seemed onerous to me. I felt I could not curse the child with what we were going through. But thoughts were one thing and passion was another. Early in the morning, I felt fear begin to take over and paralyze me.

Looking back, it seems to me that the "daughter" may have been Jewish. She spoke emotionally and caringly about the fate of the Jews, and she had knowledge of the methods of Nazi extermination, something Ukrainian villagers did not know much about. Ukrainians, as is well known, however, aided the Germans in capturing Jews and killing them. I will never know the truth. Even when I left, I did not know how to judge the experience.

Massacre at the Train Station

At first light, we got ready to move on. Csutoras announced that it was decided last night at the staff meeting that we would go through a selection process when we got to Sumy. The sick and disabled would be put on a train so that they would not slow down the retreat. Those who were healthy would go around the city on foot and then continue in towards the city of Nizhyn, another 200 km further on.

The way was covered in snow. Young girls swept it off with large brooms. Some of them spoke to us without raising their heads: "Jews, do not go into Sumy. You will meet with a terrible fate." Our legs became heavier as the fear within us intensified. Were the stories true about special killing squads for the Jews?

After a few kilometers we stopped. A Hungarian doctor stood before for a selection process. Twenty one of those who had contracted typhus or suffered from severe exhaustion were sent to one side. They were joined by forty four patients from other Jewish battalions. Csutoras assigned Dr. Marton to oversee them. He and the command staff would also board the train, and would be in a heated car, which was a real treat.

Csutoras instructed his personal attaché, Hartman, to join the patients and help Dr. Marton with them. At the last moment he added:

"And you, too, Shomo."

The words and tone of voice were familiar. It was exactly how he had ordered me join the bizarre night ride near Arkhangelskoya. The train would pass through Russian territory, and he would need me as interpreter.

I went to say goodbye to my friends and part from my horse Mishi. Separation from her was difficult. Throughout the retreat she had served me faithfully on the arduous journey. Besides the heavy snow there were many obstacles: dead people and horses, abandoned military equipment, as well as tree branches and trunks that had been cut down. Mishi faced them all bravely and was patient and dedicated in every task. I rewarded her by never going to sleep without taking care of the feed and finding her a warm place to sleep. We would not set off before I watered her down with two buckets of water.

Parting from my friends was also hard. We were supposed to meet again, but we had gotten used to the unexpected in war. The junior Hungarian commanders organized the battalion to continue the march.

Csutoras' officers' quarters were in the closed and heated space assigned to them. The patients and their attendants, including me, were given two open cars carrying damaged cannons heading to the rear for repairs. The hours ticked by, and we got ready to spend the night. I have not mentioned the main thing: the train of cars was on a siding at the station. We were not connected to a locomotive.

The patients sighed - because of their illness, and from the freezing cold. Dr. Marton made his way between them and tried to comfort them, but he seemed helpless. The damaged cannon carcasses were like a bone in our throats. An accidental touch of a freezing cannon and your hand got stuck to the metal and caused a cold sore. This situation plus the feverish hallucinations of the sick men bode evil.

There began a boisterous movement of Germans, Hungarians, and Italians at the station. Whole units and lone soldiers moved in all directions. Trucks loaded with equipment and people came and went as German soldiers prepared houses for explosion by drilling large holes in the walls. There was enormous commotion.

In the middle of the night it looked like the sick were about to freeze to death. We thought it would be a good idea to carry them into the enclosed structure of the station. The healthy ones, Hartman, Dr. Marton and I did it. The station was full of hundreds of Hungarian soldiers, who sat waiting for a train to pick them up. They were just waiting for an opportunity like this. After we had brought all 65 patients inside, some of the Hungarians told us that it was an affront to their dignity that these little Jews were put with them inside the station. Our protests that these men were conscripts of the Hungarian army, sick and exhausted, fell on deaf ears. We had no choice but to carry all the patients back to the open car. Sixty-five patients carried back and forth. That's how the night went.

The dawn had risen and not a sign of a locomotive. Hartman and I were looking for ways to improve the situation. We left the patients with Dr. Marton and began to walk around the station. In one corner we saw an opening and entered. Inside was a huge warehouse that was not being guarded. To be exact, it was a food warehouse, from which supplies were sent to the front. There were cheeses, smoked and fresh meat, sweets, chocolate, and rows upon rows of canned preserves as far as the eye could see, so immense were the contents. Given the menu we had been served in recent months, the warehouses seemed like an illusion. I didn't know what to take hold of first - everything had been left unattended.

We were very hungry, but we knew it would be best to bring out as much food as possible and only then begin to eat. We didn't know

when we would encounter the guards, and we wanted to take care of our sick and wounded comrades. Unlike other soldiers who discovered the warehouses, we did not attack the alcoholic drinks. Dozens of Hungarians and Italians drank to the point of senselessness. People rolled around naked outdoors, not feeling the extreme cold. Some of them dunked their heads into the wine barrels. They were only thinking about the pleasures of the moment. I took one bottle of rum and overcame my urge to drink it on the spot. Instead, I shoved it him into my rucksack, thinking it would be nice to come back to at night. Then we found a blanket, loaded it with a large quantity of food, and hauled it back to the railroad car. We did several more times, until we had a trailer full of all good things.

Csutoras paid us a morning visit. When he saw the supplies, he was pleased: "You did well. I may need some of yours, too! Who knows?"

He did not know when a locomotive would arrive.

The sick men on the car had been serving with me for the past three years. Not everyone came to the battalion strong and accustomed to hard work, but they all gave their best for the battalion to succeed. Both the coddled and the weak had coped with the physical work and harsh weather conditions. Due to their illness, the sick were in an even more degrading situation than in the labor camps under the Hungarian commanders. Here they were lying under the open skies, in the middle of a freezing train station, unable to take care of themselves.

Hours passed. I grabbed a can of preserves and moved to the side to rest and eat it quietly. I was exhausted from two sleepless nights, and fear had pierced my heart. I didn't let myself break down. I tried to keep my head and stay awake and alert, thinking and planning. The can of preserves was frozen and not edible. I approached the

locomotive driver who had just arrived at the station and asked for some hot water to thaw it. He told me where to put it and pointed to a faucet. Steam from the locomotive thawed the can. I desperately needed this food, but it had barely reached my lips when Hartman came running, frightened. His voice was shaking. "Shomo, come quickly," he said. "They're throwing the patients out of the car."

I threw down the can and ran. We saw a German soldier, standing in the car and heaving the sick patients out like they were bags of sand. It was not a particularly difficult task. Their physical state made it impossible for them to resist and they weighed very little.

I approached the soldier and asked, in German: "What are you doing?"

He shouted: "These are stinking Jews. We have to get rid of them all."

I rushed to the officers' car for Csutoras. The car was warm and cozy. Csutoras was wearing civilian trousers, a sweater, and slippers. He immediately donned his uniform, with World War I battle decorations, and grabbed his hat and pistol. Even under pressure, he made sure that his appearance suited his high rank. Only then did he hurry to our railroad car.

"What are you doing?" he asked the German soldier in a tone of authority.

The German gave him the same answer as he had given me.

Csutoras pointed to his insignia and thought it would arouse some respect and fear in the German.

But that is not what happened. "Get out of here, you Hungarian gypsy! I'm from the Einsatzgruppen," he barked and pulled back the lapel on his shirt. The special SD emblem was sewn inside. "Today we finish all the Jews here."

The Einsatzgruppen, the "Mission Task Forces," was the name of

special units of the SS, the SicherheittsDienste - the Nazi Security Service. Their main role was to eliminate Jews, and they imposed their will on other units. Members of the Einsatzgruppen were allowed to execute anyone who opposed or interfered with them, including German soldiers. Their authority was even broader than that of the regular SS and the Wehrmacht. They could demand assistance from every soldier and from every unit in carrying out their missions, and whoever refused could face death on the spot.

Csutoras was startled. He was in an inferior position. "Shomo, this is bad," he said. "Arrange for some men to carry the patients off the platform and away from the car. We will try to get out of the station. It's infested with these SD troops."

I spoke softly with Dr. Marton. I took off my cape and told him to wrap it around him so they would not see the yellow stripe on the sleeve. I was wearing a Hungarian uniform and had an automatic rifle.

We stood to the side. A Hungarian soldier who recognized me did not miss the opportunity and shouted at me: "Why are you over there? You are one of them. Join them!" Just at that moment, a truckload of soldiers arrived, carrying machine guns. They started shooting at my friends. Staub was among the sick patients. He realized that he had only seconds to live and he managed to get up on his feet. "Shomo," he called out. "You are blessed by heaven, you will survive. Tell them what we went through, how they slaughtered us for nothing. Remember this day!" He shouted, and was shot dead.

It was the 14th of February 1943. Until I die I will observe a day of remembrance for him and his courageous confrontation with death. Throughout the period of our acquaintance his behavior testified to a strong character. Facing death, while others around us burst into tears, he had remained calm and true to himself when he charged

me to commemorate this day. In writing this account, I honor his memory and his last words to me.

I have thought about those moments hundreds of times. I am convinced that the Hungarian head officers did not tell Csutoras about it. They knew what was going to happen to the patients and hid it from him. In his innocence and kindness he had no idea of what was to occur.

Self-Respect Versus Comfort

I was standing on the railway platform. A decorated, high ranking German officer suddenly appeared and addressed me in German. In his eyes I was a Hungarian soldier. He ordered me to point out the way to the Hungarian officers' car. Miraculously, I found myself walking away from the scene of the massacre in the company of a senior German officer.

I have no words to describe what was going on in my mind at that moment. Things were happening at a dizzying pace. I was sickened by the murder of my comrades in front of my eyes, by the Hungarian soldier who recognized me, by the fact that I had managed to hide Dr. Marton's yellow badge, and by Staub's last decree, and here I was enjoying a moment of grace and gentility - a German officer rescuing me from certain death at the last second.

What should I do? How do I hide my identity? If I enter the officers' car before him and announce his arrival, I'll be taking a risk. The Hungarian officers will throw me out and the German will immediately understand who I was, and a German officer was authorized to shoot me on the spot. I decided to stay down on the platform outside the car call, and gesture to the German that was the car he wanted.

He stepped up into the car and left the door open. Out of the

corner of my eye I saw Csutoras and heard what was being said. I stood like a tree planted on the platform and did not move. I was stunned by what I had just been through and by what my ears were now overhearing.

The truth is, I did not have to hear anything at all. Csutoras' facial expression said it all. I knew every nuance of his look, and I saw him being reprimanded and insulted. He had not yet recovered from the "Hungarian gypsy" epithet, and now he was being stung by a haughty, authoritative senior German officer. Csutoras' face went through various changes in hue. His jutting lower jaw bore witness to his anger and frustration.

When the German entered the car he saluted and shouted, "Heil Hitler." The Hungarian officers stood up like raw recruits before their commander, ready to heed the words of the German. The German officer told them that the Jews from the Labor Service battalions were providing intelligence to the partisans, and they should be eliminated to pay for their treachery.

Csutoras' commander, a Hungarian lieutenant general was in the car. He replied in German with confidence, plainly and appropriately. He had overseen these battalions for three years, he said, and he knew them well. He was certain that the men of the battalion would not betray them.

I was surprised to hear the Hungarian arguing with the German officer. The German did not elaborate and did not enter into an argument, but replied: "As you know, you are subordinate to the Wehrmacht, subordinate to the SS, and subordinate to the SicherheittsDienste." In other words, the Hungarian's opinion was of no interest to him. "If you do not want to see your people executed, get out of Sumy."

The Hungarian officer did not give in. "We cannot move from here,"

he said. "We have been stranded for hours without a locomotive."

The German appeared to have been waiting for this. Our comrades had already been massacred, but order must be maintained. He pulled out a notebook and a pen, handed it to the Hungarian and said, "Sign here that you are handing over your people to me, and you will have your locomotive."

The Hungarian signed with a trembling hand. The German pulled another notebook out of his pocket, ripped out a red page and said: "Take this to the office. You will receive your locomotive today!"

My ears burned with every word. I felt sick to my stomach. Flashes of my life passed before my eyes. If I stay where I am, I will die immediately. I was determined not to give up my life without a fight. The Germans were fighting the Jews as a people, and if they are fighting me - I will fight back.

"My soul shall die with the Philistines," I said to myself. I had a semi-automatic rifle, and I would not be slaughtered like an animal!

Mother's Blanket is Lost

In a second, I had recovered. I crouched down and slipped underneath the car to the other side of the track. From there, I moved from track to track, weaving in and out of standing cars and moving trains. I was determined to get far away from the officers' car and the killing platform.

Near one of the trains I saw Dr. Marton running towards me. He, too, was trying to take refuge from certain death. We hugged each other. He said in a broken voice: "Sixty six of our friends are already dead."

He had changed beyond recognition. Marton, who had always been matter of fact and tough, and knew how to handle everything calmly, now seemed confused. His face was white as chalk. He hugged me again and said in tears: "You are my second mother. My mother gave me life when I was born, and you gave me life a second time with the cape. They shot people who were already half dead. They did not tell them to turn and did not cover their eyes. They shot them without batting an eye. Even Hartman. He pleaded with them in vain."

We were in mortal danger. We had to flee as fast as we possibly could. We ran together until we came out of the station area. An

elderly woman appeared in the open field, a black scarf around her head. She signaled to us with her hand, gesturing towards the entrance of an underground hideaway, as if to say, "You can escape here." Seconds later I realized it was the woman in whose house I had slept two days before, the house where I met the young woman teacher, who tried to stop me from entering Sumy. I do not know what she was doing near the train station. Had she come to save Jews from the fate they were facing?

Things were happening at a whirlwind pace. I did not even have a second to stop and thank her.

We found ourselves inside a huge warehouse underneath the station. It was a world of its own. Piles of coal, wood, and small freight cars were arranged in perfect order. Everything was organized, with walkways, literally like narrow streets between the stockpiles. Here we had a second to breathe and we heaved a sigh of relief. But just at that moment, out of the corner of my eye we saw a Ukrainian policeman in a black uniform, armed with a rifle, walking in our direction. The black uniform he wore meant that he belonged to a unit that cooperated with the Nazis. We knew that if we fell into his hands, all was lost. He would betray us without hesitation or kill us himself.

We had to make a quick decision. I told Marton to take off his rucksack, and I removed mine, too. We placed them next to each other and stood to the side as if to defecate. I knew the Ukrainian character. I hoped my instinct was right and the Ukrainian would settle for the rucksacks. He came closer, and when he saw the packs, he snatched them and ran. Like a little thief running to check what he caught with his fishing rod.

Our lives were saved. But all my possessions were taken. First, the blanket my mother had made for me and which warmed me, physically and emotionally. Every time I wrapped myself in it, I had

managed to find a little peace and comfort for my stormy soul. Another great loss for me were the phylacteries I had received for my bar mitzvah, and as I had promised my mother, I made sure to put them on for prayers every day. Sometimes even on Saturdays, due to confusion about the days of the week. All the mementoes I had been given by my friends in Arkhangelskoya were also in the rucksack. They had always reminded me of the wonderful people I had known there. All lost in an instant.

What a bizarre existence. Several times during the day I was on the verge of death, and now I was feeling sorry over losing things. But they were more than mere objects.

The phylacteries and blanket connected me to my mother's house. They allowed me to recall other, better days, and comforting moments in the most difficult times. Like a little boy taking his toys from home with him when he travels somewhere else. But these were not mere material things, but important means to survival.

The burden on my back was lighter, but the mental stress became heavier.

Better than Beer, Tastier than Wine

We had reached the end of the warehouse. There was a commotion outside. Germans riding motorcycles back and forth in a frenzy, looking for something. Years later I learned that they were looking for Dr. Marton and me. Their order was to kill 68 Jews, and they had only 66 bodies. We were an obstacle to the cursed German thoroughness. They assumed that we were dressed in civilian clothes with a yellow stripe on the sleeve. They also assumed we were ill. They did not imagine that the two missing men were a man in a Hungarian army uniform, armed with a rifle and Dr. Marton with a camouflage-colored cape.

We had to get away quickly. We decided that whoever we see we would say that we had to reach our unit and ask the way to reach Nizhyn. We knew that our only chance for survival was to join our battalion. Only there would we find protection. But first, we had to get away from the station.

We saw two German soldiers from the Feldgendarmerie in front of us, handcuffs hanging from their belts. "How do we get to Nizhyn?" I asked in German. They replied, "Come with us. We will show you the way." Our hearts leaped into our throats. We were sure they would discover who we were and betray us.

But we had no choice and followed them. They led us through the alleyways on the outskirts of the city. We had to push out thoughts of the terrible events of the day and seem to be calm. To allay any suspicion, I asked them twice: "So, where is the road to Nizhyn?"

On the gate of a fenced compound we approached hung a sign in German: 'Field Troops Command Headquarters'. I was seized with fear. That's it, we're done. I thought my heart could be heard beating kilometers away.

The two Germans stopped and said, "Friends, three blocks from here, turn right. That is the road to Nizhyn. The war isn't over yet. Don't be so nervous." For the umpteenth time that day, we were given a reprieve from the death sentence hanging over our heads.

At the edge of town we came to a checkpoint manned by Hungarian soldiers. They said the road was blocked. After four o'clock it was dangerous to leave Sumy because of the partisans. We tried to persuade them, but they stood their ground.

I conducted the discussions with the Germans, while Dr. Marton did the talking with the Hungarians. He had grown up in Budapest and it was his native tongue. While we stood talking to the guards, their commander arrived. In a split second he and Marton were hugging each other. They were classmates. We did not need more than that. Within minutes we found ourselves outside Sumy city limits, Marton's friend's blessing for a safe journey echoing in our ears behind us.

We were up to our knees in snow, and it was freezing cold. At dusk we were physically and mentally exhausted. We only knew the general direction. We had no idea when we would reach the battalion. We had been rescued from hell, but the day was not yet over, and other 'hells' were plentiful in the area in those days. The uncertainty and fear of descending nightfall did not make things any easier.

Just then a blizzard blew up. The wind whipped so hard at our bodies and faces that we could barely move forward. It wasn't coming from one direction, but in a vortex. Marton felt his strength waning and wanted to give up. "Go on," he said. "Leave me here. I will only hold you back. I've gone as far as I can. I'm finished."

For a moment I was angry with him. I had saved him from death at the hands of the Germans, and now he chooses to die?

He insisted: "I want to freeze here in the snow with a smile on my face. Remember what the soldiers who froze to death in the retreat looked like? I want to die like that."

I realized that the day's events had played havoc with his thinking. He was confused, and not in control of himself. I could not leave him in the snow. All the 'adventures' we had been through in our years of service together flashed through my mind. Above all, we had the bond between us that had been forged at the train station.

I could not carry him on my back. I put his hand on my shoulder, and he clung to me from behind with my feet dragging us through the snow. That's how we trudged on, half-walking, and half-falling.

Going through the forests in the snowstorm and in the dark was one long, continual hallucination.

Marton was mentally summing up his life, describing out loud the images flashing through his mind. He went through the names of all the soldiers in the battalion, without exception. As an amateur psychologist, he knew the physical and mental weaknesses of each of us.

In his meandering monologue he came to Csutoras. Marton had also treated him and got to know his personality traits well. Now, as he was going in and out of mental sharpness, he described Csutoras as an innocent; a man, who believed everything his superiors said and promised. His perception of Hungarian honor was twisted, Marton said. He mocked Csutoras' rigid ceremonial behavior. When

Csutoras received a phone call in the middle of the night from a superior officer, he would hasten to put on his boots. The click of his heels could be heard by the caller on the other end of the line, who must have laughed. Marton believed that what was happening now was due to Csutoras' naiveté. He couldn't see what was right in front of his eyes and did not realize how close the anti-Semitic cooperation was between the Hungarian command and the German army.

On the other hand, he said, Csutoras saw to all our needs in a fatherly manner, and thanks to him we had survived, while in other battalions most of the recruits had been killed. He tried to give personal attention to each individual problem. As there were 280 men in our battalion, there were no lack of problems to be addressed.

Marton debated whether it was better to be innocent and kind-hearted or clever and evil-minded. It was clear that he was hallucinatory. Apparently, this question had occupied his thoughts for a long time. This internalized question came out only when he had lost control of what he was saying.

We progressed step by step. I was barely able to keep going with the heavy burden under such punishing conditions. Marton spoke his thoughts out loud and I murmured to myself: Why are we even struggling to survive? We did the best we could, and they shot 66 of our comrades without blinking an eye. As if everything they had done and contributed had not even happened. If we had been able to let them rest five or six days, with minimal medical treatment, most of them would have recovered and continued.

Once again it became clear to me that the Germans were determined to carry out the "final solution to the Jewish question." I had internalized the understanding that anyone who had survived the minefields, the cold and the hard labor, would meet death in another way, either at the hand of the Germans or the Hungarians – either by

being thrown into a ditch or killed in the open air. So why not give up? Why continue this road of never-ending anguish?

We did not stop for a moment. I knew that if we were to rest we would not be able to get up again. I would take care of my bodily needs while walking so as not to lose time. I was frightened to keep going deep into the night. From time to time I bent down, grabbed some snow, and smeared my face and neck with it. I did the same for Marton. Our bodies were drenched in sweat. We also drank the snow. Because of his mental state and the fact that he spoke all the time, Marton suffered from constant thirst.

Every time I held up a handful of snow to his lips, he said, "It tastes better than beer, better than wine."

Raising the Dead

After four hours of walking, we heard a blood-curdling shout in German: "Halt! Stehen bleiben" Again I felt that everything was done for nothing. Why did I go through all this? To die from a bullet from a German guard?

With a last drop of strength I shouted in German into the darkness: "Do you know where Battalion 2 is stationed? We need to join our battalion."

"Yes," came the voice from the darkness. "Five miles from here. Continue straight and then go right."

Those last five kilometers were the hardest of all.

I was on the verge of total collapse. At ten o'clock at night we reached the village and heard men speaking Hungarian and Yiddish. I felt like the Messiah had come. The battalion soldiers welcomed us as if we had come back from the dead. Csutoras had informed his superior officers that all the patients and attendants had been executed, and yet here we were, standing before them, alive.

Our friends bombarded us with questions. We gave no answers, but merely fainted and fell to the floor.

We spent the night in the kitchen. It was a restless sleep, full of nightmares. The dreams brought back all we had gone through.

Comrades who slept with us in the kitchen told us the next day that they were worried we might not make it through the night. They said we didn't stop talking and screaming, and even laughing in our sleep.

We awoke running a high fever and couldn't stand on our feet. They loaded us onto one of the sleds. Two days later, it turned out that Marton had pneumonia in both of his lungs. Only one of my lungs was damaged. The battalion continued in the direction of Nizhyn, and we lay burning with fever on the sleds.

When our condition improved a little, we had time to look around us. In the same crowded path of retreat, were German and Hungarian forces in massive numbers. The order of priority was clear and dictated by the Nazis. Their attitude towards us had worsened. So as not to fall as easy prey into the hands of the Germans, we had to move away from the main line of retreat. We made detour after detour through the villages, making the journey longer. Progress was slow, and every day more people became ill with typhus. Each kilometer took three times longer than the one before.

At night we stayed in the villages. I have only the highest praise for the women villagers. They took care of us as if we were their own sons or part of their families. They went out of their way to heat water for bathing and they dried out our clothes and shoes. March was approaching. Despite the bitter cold, the snow began to thaw. Everything was wet, especially the shoes.

As had happened on the way to Sumy, more than once a German regiment arrived after we had settled into a peasant house. They threw us out and took our place. We had to wait in the snow and cold until the peasants collected our clothes and brought them out to us. Sometimes we got replacement lodgings in a barn or a stable.

At night, when I thought about February 14, 1943, I could not decide what was more difficult: the physical struggle, or the struggle

against the desire to give up. We made good decisions and were resourceful, but that was not enough. I believe we survived with the help of God above.

A Lesson in Judaism and Zionism

We reached Nizhyn on foot. Csutoras and the senior staff came by train, and our meeting struck him with astonishment. He suddenly saw two dead people: Dr. Marton and Shomo, who he was certain had been murdered in Sumy. He did not know where to begin with his questions and we didn't know how to begin to tell him what had happened to us on that horrific day. A month had passed since then.

The emotional encounter took place in a kind of circle. The Hungarian officers and soldiers of the battalion stood around us. Csutoras said: "You know what it means to have escaped from the SD? It's unheard of. If it were not for the laws against the Jews, you would be given Medals of Honor for your bravery." He hugged Dr. Marton and kissed him on both cheeks and did the same to me. His "hero decoration" came from a real place deep within him and was worth more valuable than a gold medal.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the Hungarian officers standing there and laughing at us. In their eyes, we were ragged and useless. Csutoras' chivalrous gesture seemed to them a lack of self-respect. We heard them say, "These damn Jews, how can he honor them like that? What the hell did they do to deserve it?"

The battalions needed rest. The retreat in the freezing cold had

taken its toll. As I said, another hundred thousand Jews were recruited after us into the Labor Service. Fifty thousand of them were sent to Russia. Only a few thousand survived. Several hundred of them had gathered in Nizhyn and were attached to our battalions. Their commander was the same Hungarian lieutenant colonel who had abandoned our sick soldiers at Sumy where the Germans slaughtered them.

One day, I was sent to the building where the officers were staying, in the compound of an abandoned power station. I was still armed with a rifle. The lieutenant colonel addressed me. "You," he said. "You there with the rifle, you have sharp eyes. Keep guard here at night. Do you see the holes in the floor? These are rat holes. When you see a rat pop out of the hole, shoot it. I'm afraid to sleep with so many rats." When he left, I couldn't help laughing. He knew me as the one who had managed to escape the SD in Sumy! But in the eyes of this racist, a Jew can only be a hero over rats!

Two days later, Csutoras ordered me to his office. I went in and saluted. He brushed off the salute with his hand. "Sit down," he said. "I want to talk to you. Do you know who I really miss?" He asked and added immediately: "Hartman." Between brushing his boots, washing, and ironing his clothes, the master violinist Hartman had raised Csutoras' spirits with his playing. Csutoras was consumed with guilt and heartache. He had sent Hartman to his death.

He took out a bottle of rum and poured me a glass. I thought to myself: if a high-ranking Hungarian officer invites a Jew for a drink in his quarters, things are bad. I realized I was going to make the acquaintance of 'Csutoras the man'.

For the first time since we had met he asked personal questions. "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" he asked. I told him my mother gave birth to ten children. "Heroic woman," he said. "Are

they all tall and agile like you?" "I'm the laziest," I replied. "Why lazy? What did you do before the war?" he responded.

I told him I had been in a constant struggle with myself. I wanted to study medicine, because I thought the profession suited me, but because of my environment, I only studied religious subjects. Then the war came, and interrupted that, too.

"Tell me, are you a communist?"

"Me, a communist?" I replied. "No, no. I am a Zionist."

"Are you religious?"

I replied that I was religious and that I used to put on phylacteries every day. Then I went into the details of that cursed day at Sumy. I told him about the cape I had given to Dr. Marton, about the Hungarian officer who wanted to send me back to the death row, about the German officer who appeared and ordered me to accompany him to the headquarters car. I told him what I heard from the car, then about my escape underneath the railroad carriages and meeting up with Marton. And then meeting the old woman, the escape into the underground warehouses, the encounter with the Ukrainian policeman and the hunch that he would be satisfied stealing our backpacks and that was how I had lost my phylacteries.

Csutoras did not hide his admiration. He asked if the phylacteries were the strips of leather that Jews wind around their arms. I explained to him that it was much more complex. "You wrap a leather strap on the left forearm, the arm closest to the heart. At the same time you lay a double strap over your head. Attached to the two straps is a small box with a parchment inside attesting to the greatness of the one God. This symbolizes to us that behavior must be balanced – that there is a connection between the heart and the mind.

"I did not know that." he said. "That is not right. I am in command of 280 Jews and I know nothing about your religion. I should have

asked Staub to teach me."

And so we came to the subject of Staub.

"Staub was the only one who did not cry out at the murder in Sumy," I told him. "Not only did he not cry or lose his temper; he stood up and charged me with his dying testament. His request was that I tell how he and his friends were slaughtered after faithfully fulfilling their obligations and yet the Hungarian state abandoned them and betrayed them. People need to know this."

Csutoras moved back in his chair as I continued: "Staub ordered me to hold a memorial service for him and the others who were murdered. That was after the Germans started firing on his comrades. He knew exactly what would happen to him in a few seconds and knew what he wanted to say."

It was as if Csutoras was seeking a crash course in Judaism. He asked what a memorial service consisted of. I explained to him about the "Kaddish" and "Yizkor" prayers that Jews recite in memory of their departed loved ones. He listened intently to my every word.

After more than an hour we began to speak of the future. Csutoras asked me to explain Zionism. "That will take a while," I said, but Csutoras was adamant. "Tell me about it. There is no rush."

I had here a military man. Organizing his time was a fundamental element of his personality. Suddenly, he was relaxed, as if we were two friends in a bar, sharing a drink. I began to explain. "The personal security and religious freedom of my people have been in a precarious state in Europe for hundreds of years. Jews had lived before in their homeland, the Holy Land, for thousands of years. Our religion is intimately connected with the land. Our forebears lived and died and were buried there. Almost two thousand years ago, my people suffered a disaster, and our ancestors were exiled from the land by the Roman conquest. The mighty Roman Empire ruled the

land and declared war on Judaism. The little Jewish nation refused to abandon the faith in one God and pray to the Roman idols, and when the Romans began to oppress them, a revolt broke out for which they paid a heavy price. The Romans exiled Jews as slaves to Rome and changed the name of the land to Palestine. Three hundred years later, the Romans adopted Christianity, and Judaism and Christianity entered an era of conflict. The church incited the masses against the Jews, who were considered infidels, but the rabbis, our religious leaders, forbade the Jews to fight back. The memory of the failed revolt and its consequences were etched into their collective memory, and they believed that the fate of the Jewish people depended on the will of God. When God decides that the time had come, he will send the Redeemer who will return the people of Israel to their homeland.

"Until then, the Jews lowered their heads, lived in exile and endured everything they were destined to endure. The Jewish communities, affected by decrees and riots, retreated into themselves, weeping, burying their dead, and moving on.

"The consolation was spiritual: continual immersion in the Scriptures. The Jews studied Torah and Mishnah and Gemara, the Jewish holy books from morning till night to be considered successful, and the leaders of the people were not men of power but spiritual men. Civilian leadership did not exist. There were no national aspirations and no way to unite the people, which had been scattered all over the world for ages. The Jews split into dozens of groups, without common leadership. They all did their utmost to keep the Jewish commandments and remain loyal to their religion. But because there was no unity, it was easy to suppress us.

"About fifty years ago, a new movement arose, which rebelled against this old order. The movement's founder, Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl, called for the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of

Israel, which was also called 'Zion.' He saw it as the only solution to the safety and future of the Jewish people: to become a people like all others, in their own homeland. That is Zionism.

"What happened in Sumy would not have happened if we had our own state. If I survive, I will do anything to reach the Land of Israel, even go there barefoot, and be a part of the establishment of an independent Jewish state. Our next generation must have a safe haven. You have seen for yourself what we are capable of."

"Yes, you know how to work and know how to overcome difficulties better than others," Csutoras said. "I was as proud of you as a father of his children. This Zionism is an unbelievably beautiful idea, but it seems it will be exceedingly difficult to implement. Is your country waiting there for you, empty of inhabitants?"

"Jews have been trying to return to their land for 60 years. We are going through diplomatic channels as well as taking practical steps. We are persuading political leaders and purchasing land and settling the country. Our leaders, led by Haim Weizmann, came to an agreement with Emir Faisal, the son of Hussein, king of Hijaz. The agreement set out the relationship between the Zionists and the Arab kingdom after the First War, in such a way that divided the country between the two peoples. It was incorporated into the agreements signed after the First World War, and many countries, including the United States, Britain, Germany, Italy, and Japan supported it. The League of Nations also was in favor. Now, Arab groups have risen who do not recognize Faisal's authority to sign on behalf of the Arabs, and they oppose the agreement.

"At one of the commissions set up to rule on the issue, the Peel Commission, Weizmann declared rightly that we are a homeless people. Close to six million Jews are divided between places where they cannot live in security, and countries where they are not allowed

to enter. As early as 1936, he foresaw the tragedy that would befall the Jews."

I told Csutoras that I was convinced we would eventually get along with the Arabs, despite the difficulties. "Jews have already begun to buy Arab land, and the Arabs are selling. They do not believe that the Jews will succeed in bringing returnees to the swampy lands or rocky areas they are selling and are convinced that they will get the land back when the Jews give up in despair. But the reality is that flourishing agricultural and urban settlements are being established. There are already 500,000 Jews living in Eretz Yisrael."

"And where does the development money come from?" inquired Csutoras.

"From the Jewish people themselves. They are all enlisted in the mission of redemption of the land. Every Jewish home has a small blue-and-white metal box, like a child's saving bank. The members of the household donate to the fund every Friday, before lighting the Sabbath candles. Poor people put in a kopek, a zloty, a pengő, or a mark. The affluent contribute more, and the extraordinarily rich, like Baron Rothschild, buy tracts of land for settlements, and even help establish them. The Zionist idea is making progress."

Csutoras smiled. "Shomo, I believe in you. You will go far and fulfill everything you dream of. But this Zionism is not a simple matter. Leave it. Your people have other problems to worry about."

I got up to salute him and go out, as a soldier does before his commanding officer. Csutoras stood up, hugged me, and accompanied me to the door like a father would accompany his son.

But Csutoras was one of a kind. Most Hungarian commanders were Jew haters and racists. They were responsible for the fact that so few Jews of the battalions survived. In the other battalions - because of inept command, unfair allocation of food, abandonment of men

to the freezing cold, sending thousands of Jews to the minefields, and often, literally murdering them.

The result was that the commanders of the other battalions were jealous of Csutoras, for the way in which Battalion No. 2 carried out their missions and survived. On the other hand, this created tension, in that they looked down on Csutoras for his warm and caring attitude toward 'his' Jews. As always, we knew this tension was not in our best interests.

The Sumy Account Comes Due

The order to continue the withdrawal came two weeks later. In the meantime, military discipline had loosened. At the head of the column rode the lieutenant colonel on a new riding mare. Alongside him was his attaché, and behind them was the Hungarian officer corps, Csutoras among them. Following next were the surviving remnants of the battalions that had joined us. Our battalion marched in the rear. It did not look like a military convoy. The fatigue of the Hungarian staff and our own exhaustion, and the desire to get away from the front and get home, was severely detrimental to discipline. According to the logic by which we functioned throughout the war, it was important to us that the Jewish battalion be an orderly military unit. It was easier for the Germans to kill a non-soldier, and we certainly did not want to look like that. The thought of keeping up our military bearing all the way back to Hungary made us shudder. Along the way, SD units searched out Jews to murder them, and the Ukrainian militias and civilians were happy to betray local Jews and help them do it. We had already marched a ways, when we came to several railroad tracks. Large signs were written in German, Hungarian, Romanian and Italian. Units from all these nationalities roamed the area. The signs provided detailed instructions on how to organize

a military convoy to cross the railroad junction safely. The lieutenant general rode his mare closer to a sign to read the instructions. His attaché motioned for us to stop. The command reached all the way to the end of the line.

Just then, there were two shrill locomotive whistles. Everything happened at lightning speed. Within seconds a locomotive appeared, hauling just a few cars. The lieutenant colonel on his horse was extremely near the tracks. The whistle spooked the mare, and she burst onto the track just as the locomotive pulled in. It sliced through her and cut off her head and the head of the lieutenant colonel.

We all stood stunned. One of the Hungarian officers spoke: "It's for certain these Jews have a God. The lieutenant colonel wanted a locomotive, and God gave him a locomotive." We felt it was a day of vengeance and recompense. At some point every debt comes due and the guilty must pay.

The Hungarians gathered the lieutenant colonel's body parts, put them in a coffin and we continued our way with a new commander.

Again, the Trains of Sumy

Russia was 250 km behind us. We moved forward with the remnants of Jewish Battalions Number 3 and Number 4. At night we slept in the houses of Ukrainians. They were happy to report that our fate was sealed. Everyone knew that Jews who were not killed in the war were captured by the Germans, shipped to concentration camps, and exterminated in the gas chambers. Despair seeped inside of us. In moments like these I had dark thoughts that I was wrong not to stay behind in Arkhangelskoya or somewhere else before reaching Sumy. Better men than me had been killed and worse than me had survived. There were moments when I knew exactly what to do, and there were other moments when fate decided for me.

The new commander quickly restored discipline. The retreat route also crossed through cities. Discipline was more stringent there, and we were surrounded by Hungarian staff. Any deviation from procedures met with immediate, severe punishment. But people got sick with typhus. They had difficulty walking, and military marching was almost impossible for them. Whoever failed to keep up was shot.

These were difficult days. Again, my friends were shot because they were ill. This time the shooters were Hungarians. The atmosphere was menacing and uncompromising.

And then I, too, fell ill with typhus. It manifested itself with high fever, terrible weakness and alternating feeling flushed or having the chills. Some men had constant diarrhea and others suffered from constipation. We ate and drank little. Some of the sick men lost their hair, others became temporarily blind. All this while trudging 35 km a day. Women peasants stood on the side of the road and muttered, "Oh God, what a cursed people."

Those who fell ill knew they had to stay close to the battalion and Csutoras. Otherwise, they would quickly cease to be among the living. I turned in my rifle to the quartermaster. I did not want to be tempted to commit suicide. My life seemed worthless. How much suffering does one have to endure to exist? In the inner depths of my heart, I secretly prayed that the covenant between my skills and my luck would continue. Holding fast to life may have been thanks to the religious education I had received. Judaism commands us to choose life.

Dr. Marton treated all the sick with dedication, but I was given preferential treatment. First, I received a large quantity of absorbent cloths to pad my buttocks. The typhus I had gave me relentless diarrhea. Second, at every opportunity he gave me drops of opium, a drug that helps stop diarrhea. He constantly told me: "Please, persevere during the day. If ,God forbid, you fall, you are lost. If you collapse at night I can help you and spend the night together with you. Don't think about tomorrow or yesterday, only today. What matters is how you get through the day."

Typhus is a serious illness. Dr. Marton's psychological approach helped me a great deal, but the disease broke new records every day. One night, I was lying in a peasant's house, feverish and shivering. Sumy's trains passed through my mind and body. I saw myself slipping beneath the railroad car, and other cars passing over me. I was

inside them and was thrown from them at the same time. I heard sirens and shots. It was clear to me that this was the day I would die. Then came the morning. In complete exhaustion, I set out once again.

I lay one hand on a wagon loaded with supplies as if I were part of its escort, and I was being dragged behind it. But I couldn't hold for long and I stumbled and fell by the side of the road, into a ditch. The battalion passed me and darkness had fallen. No one had noticed me. In between recurring bouts of fainting, I prayed that my comrades would somehow come looking for me. I did not want to die in a ditch.

Angels in Peasant Clothing

As darkness fell, a Ukrainian farmer returned from the field to his home. Miraculously, he bumped into me where I lay and fell. "Masha," he shouted to his wife in the nearby house. "Come quickly and see what's here!"

An elderly woman peasant came running, lantern in hand. She shone it in my face and said, "What a handsome, tall fellow we have here."

They spoke between them and then she ran to the house and returned with a large cloth and a pole. They spread the cloth on the ground, rolled me into it with the pole and then dragged me wrapped in the cloth all the way to the barn. Because of the disease and the lice, they didn't want to touch me. I crawled between the cow and its calf that was chewing its cud. They warmed my body and I fell asleep. I slept like a log.

I woke up at dawn, terrified. While I was trying to sort out my thoughts, the farmer and his wife entered the barn and happily exclaimed: "He's alive!" This was surprising in light of everything we had experienced so far from the Ukrainians. The farmer brought a large wooden tub into the barn and filled it with hot water. Then they stripped me naked. I tried to cover myself to hide the fact that I had

been circumcised. "Enough of that," the woman farmer said. "You're sick. Get in the tub."

I somehow managed to crawl into the tub. Within seconds, the surface of the water was full of lice. The farmer had dug a pit and buried my lice-infested clothing in it. He dug another pit, scooped up the lice that were floating in the tub and buried them as well. He now took a razor and shaved my head and body, from top to bottom. But the treatment was not complete: they brought soap and scrubbed me, washed me, and wrapped me in clean sheets. Only after all this did they bring me into the house. I had a place ready for me above the hot stove.

The room was cozy and warm. These two peasants who had come down from heaven, enlisted the help of their three married daughters and daughters-in-law, and they all shared in taking care of me. It was not easy. In less than an hour after eating anything, they had to change my cloth diaper and wash it. In the early days this was a constant preoccupation, very unpleasant and not easy to do. These people, who did not know me, did this with dedication. The mother served me buckwheat porridge every few hours. After a few days, my condition improved, and I started to enjoy being spoiled.

A few days later, the door opened and Dr. Marton entered. We fell into each other's arms, laughing and crying at the same time. He congratulated me on my good fortune and marveled at the amazing care I had received at my 'infirmary'. The battalion, he said, had stopped a mile from where I collapsed. They had converted a school into a medical clinic, and it was already overcrowded. Even Csutoras had gotten typhus, and was running a high fever, isolated from the others in a separate room. No one except Dr. Marton was allowed to see him swathed in a diaper. This news worried me. I could not imagine us getting along without Csutoras. I also wanted to see my

sick comrades in the hospital. I wanted to be with them in their darkest hour.

As soon as I was able to leave the house, I observed the biblical commandment to visit the sick. My friends were stunned when they saw me. I had lost ten kilos and yet I looked much better than they did. Lucky for me, I had fallen into a ditch near a house of angels.

As an exception, Csutoras agreed that I should enter his quarters. He grasped at my clothing, his eyes almost bulging out of their sockets. I was frightened; I did not understand what he wanted. "Tell me," he said. "Were thoughts of trains running through your head as well?" His question hit me hard. In this short sentence, Csutoras expressed his sorrow and regret for what happened in Sumy. It was further proof for me how our fates were intertwined, and how close we were to each other.

He looked terrible and said he had decided to leave the battalion. The disease had given him time to think, and he concluded that he was unable to carry on with his role. He was sick and tired of dealing with his superior officers. He had already put in for a replacement and was preparing to return to Hungary.

I understood, but apprehension overwhelmed me. I remembered how few survivors there were from the other battalions, and how Hungarian commanders had killed my comrades. Was this the fate that awaited us?

I returned to the peasants' house, my heart heavy with the news. A few days later, when the family went out to work in the fields, the daughter-in-law was on 'nursing duty' with me. She suddenly came up to me naked, with only a thin sheet covering her body, and she was muttering something. Then she got hold of herself and began to speak clearly. "I thought a lot about what I want to do and say to you. You must lay with me and give me a child." Again, it had happened!

I was stunned. She said that her husband had been drafted by the Germans and was unlikely to return home. His father and mother did not love her and did not want her. They thought she was pregnant and wanted her to have their son's child. She also thought she was pregnant, but she was wrong. I was her last chance. Otherwise, she would be cast out.

She knelt, cried, and crossed herself. "I swear no one will know. Only on my deathbed will I tell the child that his father was a Jew."

I was embarrassed and upset. I did not know how to put her off. First I said: "I'm getting over a serious illness. The child could be born with defects. They warned us not to get a woman pregnant for at least a year."

"I don't care," she cried. "The main thing is to have a child. My future depends on it."

I could not repay bad for good to the people who had saved my life. I would not help the girl trick them. I also did not want to leave behind a child, seed of my seed, in the hands of a stranger, and I refused. Her cries were heart wrenching. I helped her get dressed and she left the house. From then on, every time we sat down at the table to eat and I opened my mouth, a shiver went through her body.

Wilma, the Mare

An order came down from the authorities forbidding peasants to host soldiers or Jews in their homes. The breakup was painfully difficult. I hope my account gives appropriate respect to that wonderful and compassionate Ukrainian family. I was not a relative, not an acquaintance and not even one of their people. They took care of me with boundless devotion simply because I was a human being. They saved my life, going against the tide.

In the abandoned Kolkhoz of Dorosic, 10 km from the village, a hospital was set up for the typhus patients in the Jewish battalions to prevent the spread of the disease. It was in a large wooden structure equipped with bunk beds. Csutoras received order after order to send patients from his battalion to the hospital. Despite his attempts to ignore them, he was ultimately left with no choice. Four men with typhus were placed onto a cart drawn by a broad-backed Dutch mare named Wilma, and it set off accompanied by a Hungarian sergeant.

Wilma stopped abruptly halfway there, lay down and refused to go on. As I have said before, when horses sense their deaths are near, they refuse to move. Nothing helps, and nothing helped this time as well. No beatings and no prodding. Wilma refused to get up. The sergeant took out his rifle, shot her and cut off her tail to prove she

was dead. He and the patients trudged slowly back to the village. It was the seventh day of Passover, April 30, 1943.

That night, the sky was ablaze with fire and smoke. The Germans, with the help of Hungarian staff, had gathered about a thousand patients in the hospital. They surrounded the building with machine guns, threw burning torches at the wooden walls and set the place on fire. Anyone who tried to get out through the thatched roof was shot and killed. The rest were burned alive inside. A very few individuals managed to escape. The late Wilma, may she be remembered with gratitude, had saved our four friends from certain death.

The Hungarians joined in with the Germans in this despicable act of treachery and murder. They had convinced the patients that they would be treated in the hospital and slaughtered them. They deserved to be put on trial for war crimes, just like their German masters.

Our New Commander

Hungary had been ruled for centuries by the Magyar majority, a people who had migrated there late in the first millennium from the Siberian region and the Ural Mountains. Alongside them, lived many minorities - Romanians, Gypsies, Serbs, Jews and even 'Swabian' Germans. When Hungary allied itself with Germany, the Swabians gained in prestige. To our deep dismay, the commander appointed to replace Csutoras was a Swabian. His name was Janos Kessler. He was the sadistic officer who had taken pleasure in drowning people in the Danube by hitting them with an oar. I had come across him when we returned to Mohács for the second time. He was young, handsome, tall, and with fair skin. He spoke fluent German and looked German - and he was a dedicated racist. He cloaked his bigotry under the auspices of the military regime.

Kessler had previously served in the 3rd Battalion. Of the approximately 250 Jewish forced laborers in his battalion, fewer than ten survived. Kessler took an active role in preparing the liquidation lists. And he implemented the plan almost to its full extent.

We already knew for certain that the Hungarian commanders were accomplices of the Germans in exterminating Jews. It was also clear that the Hungarians had a method – with a philosophy behind

it. It was called "Extermination by Labor." In German, "Vernichtung durch Arbeit." Three words that told the whole story: according to the law, men were exploited and coerced to join the army. Those who could not withstand the hard labor or miserable conditions, were eliminated in other ways. And when their families were left behind without protection or support, the elderly, women, and children could also be easily eliminated.

We were witnesses to a massacre in the town of Kamieniec Podolski. Twenty-three thousand Jews: women, children and the elderly were murdered there, some right before our eyes. The killers were Ukrainians and Hungarians. The Germans supervised the massacre.

Kessler spoke loudly of his exploits with his head held high. He made certain that Jews did not come back alive from his battalion. He was a battalion commander whose mission and aspirations were to prevent his soldiers from returning to their homes. Despicable. At that time, news of the mass murder of Jews in the extermination camps in Poland had spread – murdered just because they were Jews. The Ukrainian villagers we met on the way, and in whose homes we were housed, did not spare us the gory details. Things were said, and more and more stories emerged. It was impossible to bury one's head in the sand - or in the snow.

We were very scared. But fear is not a reliable teacher. One morning, in late Spring, 1943, I was ordered to appear before Kessler. This was the period of overlap between him and Csutoras. I was trying to figure out what to expect. I consulted with Dr. Marton, and he told me that he had seen Kessler in a circle of grinning officers when he spoke to Csutoras about the night of horror in Sumy. There was no doubt that he was not pleased, although the battalion excelled in its mission. For him, too many Jews had survived. I was under intense pressure. Why was I the only one summoned?

I shaved, brushed off my uniform and made sure of a neat and meticulous appearance. I stood before him, saluted, and declared, "Stern, Samuel, called Shomo, at your service."

"Yes, I know everyone calls you Shomo," Kessler said. "I also know you are very skillful and efficient. Mihaly said many good things about you – the tractor, the fuel, the lumber mill, and the uniforms you organized for everyone. Very impressive."

"I did my duty," I replied, fearful of what he was getting at. "I also heard that you managed to escape from Sumy," he continued. My heart skipped a beat. "You'll do fine with me, too. You'll get better living conditions and will be issued a horse. But you will check in with me before every work day, and report to me what your friends talk about before they go to sleep."

The killer Kessler was staring straight into my eyes. "In that case," I said, "you will have to find someone else. I will do anything for my friends and for the battalion, but I will not spy on them."

Kessler was not used to being thwarted, particularly by a Jew. "Then you will work with a pickaxe like your comrades on the road," he said. "And you know what that could mean."

"Yes, I know. I am not only a soldier, I'm also a Jew."

I was not sure that it was the best answer I could give to a racist like Kessler. But that is what I said.

Guzsbakotes and Kikotes

I left his office with grave worries. I knew who I was dealing with. Since Kessler took over command of the battalion he had instituted severe punishments, under the pretext of enforcing military discipline. Every morning a lineup was held, and each morning Kessler sought out victims from among his 300 conscripts - 200 from our Battalion No. 2 and the few survivors from among the additional 15 regiments that had been almost wiped out. He always found someone to deal with, and the two punishments he particularly liked were severe and painful. One of them was Guzsbakotes, which I have previous described. It was inflicted by tying the hands together and forcing them down to hug the knees. They stuck a broomstick under the knees for two hours so that the legs could not be straightened. Beyond the pain, it was humiliating, because more than once the punished man defecated while in that position. When they untied the ropes and ordered him to rise, he stood before the rest of us in his soiled, stinking uniform.

Kessler's second favorite punishment was Kikotes, which was even more severe. I have also described this one before. They tie your arms behind your back and hang you from the branch of a tree for an hour. The toes had to touch the ground according to army regulations, and

a doctor and nurse had to be present on the scene, but Kessler did not always adhere to these two details. There was always a bucket of water nearby. If the man fainted, they would take him down from the branch and pour water on him. Afterwards, they would decide whether to continue hanging him to complete a full hour. Kessler gave strict orders never to shorten the sentence.

These two punishments had been accepted in the Hungarian army since the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empress Maria Theresa, more than 200 years before. They were designed for extreme and unusual situations, during battle, and had many caveats. For the Labor Service conscripts, they became everyday abuse for the Jews. All moderating conditions were ignored. The rule that the man's toes had to touch the ground was forgotten, and even the strongest among us was hard put to tolerate the Kikotes when the full weight of his body was supported by his arms that were bound behind his back.

According to the original instructions, if the man being punished changed colors it was proof that he was in great distress and should be released before he lost consciousness. With Kessler, many men fainted while hanging, totally humiliated. Of course, he never inflicted this punishment on Hungarian soldiers, only Jews.

Kessler suffered from gonorrhea and required daily medical treatment. Dr. Marton claimed that the disease increased his cruelty. Beyond his inbred racism, he took revenge on those who did not have the onerous ailment.

One more thing: the punishments were scheduled on Sundays, when the peasants were leaving church. Kessler enjoyed punishing the Jews, but he also took advantage of exhibiting the pain and humiliation of our comrades to terrify Ukrainians. They cooperated with the Nazis, but according to Kessler it was best they'd be frightened a bit as well. The wheel of war was turning, and the Russians

were approaching. It was desirable that Ukrainians know that each of them could be bound and hung.

Franz Loli tended to give free rein to his tongue, and he shared his views with everyone, including his complaints. He was often punished for it. Because he was sturdy and strong, when he was sentenced to be hanged by his arms, they made it worse for him and suspended him ten cm above the ground. The Hungarian master sergeant oversaw the punishment and he had a conscript from our battalion swing poor Loli back and forth on the tree branch, accompanied by a recounting of his transgressions. The man who did the pushing back and forth had tried unsuccessfully to save his parents from death at Kamyanets-Podilskyi and he had lost his mind.

When Loli was taken down from the hanging branch he was unconscious. His clothing was filthy and wet. When he was awakened with a bucket of water, it turned out that he was unable to move his arms. Dr. Marton examined him and determined that his arm muscles had been irrevocably torn. It would have been better for him to die, but he was alive. We took daily shifts, dressed, and undressed him, took him to the bathroom, fed him and gave him cigarettes, as needed. His arms were completely useless. They looked like wooden sticks hanging alongside his body. After two months of rest and basic physiotherapy, he was able to use them again.

Images of my tied and bound comrades went through my mind as I left Kessler's quarters. I knew that even if I had accepted his offer, my situation would not improve. At some point he would find a reason to punish me and get rid of me. He was careful to destroy any evidence against him.

Suddenly I heard Csutoras' voice, and then Kessler's. I stopped to step back and listen.

"He is an unusual fellow, this Shomo of yours," said Kessler.

"Yes," replied Csutoras. "He is an outstanding man. You will see that you will derive benefit from him."

"I do not understand," Kessler continued, "I promised him I would help him if he cooperated with me, and he refused."

That was all I could hear.

Csutoras Continues to Protect Me

Luckily, Csutoras heard about our conversation from Kessler and not from me. A few days later he called for me. "I'm leaving in a few days," he said. "And I have arranged a new job for you. You will not be part of the battalion anymore. Spring has come, and the Germans need the farmers to plant the summer crops in time for harvest. You will be the liaison and coordinator with the head of the kolkhoz, as you were in Arkhangelskoya. You will have horses and travel authorization. Mano Klein will join you as a wagon driver and take care of the animals."

Thank God and Csutoras for getting me away from Kessler. But Csutoras did more. He sought to get Kessler away from all the men in the battalion that he had led and nurtured. Once again he chose to swim against the current in an army plagued with terrible racism. About two weeks after Csutoras left, word came down that Kessler would be transferred from the battalion within 24 hours. This was an unusual order. It came thanks to a report that Major Mihai Csutoras passed on to the Hungarian High Command, outlining the gross misconduct of his successor.

Csutoras cared for us, but he cared much more for Hungary. He believed that making the Jews into punching bags was harmful to

Hungary, and he was convinced that the Labor Service battalions could have been much more helpful if the Jews had not been treated as criminals and traitors. Even in the High Command, there were those who understood that the Jews were loyal to the Hungarian flag. The older men among them remembered that in the First World War the Jews enlisted en masse in the army, and many fought valiantly as officers. Although they represented only six percent of the population, they made up about a quarter of the Hungarian casualties of that war.

In a normal world, to explain why Kessler had to leave his post, Csutoras would only have had to quote the introductory speech his successor delivered to us: "In the previous battalion I led, only a few survived. This is what I wanted, and for that I shall be responsible." But as I have written here before, these were the instructions given to the battalion commanders. We were the victims of hatred for minorities, a hatred that had permeated the culture of Hungary. Csutoras was one of a small minority who refused to succumb to the racist madness. He no doubt had used alternative arguments to persuade the Hungarian High Command to oust Kessler from his position immediately.

Csutoras' Farewell Ceremony

Before Csutoras finally departed from us, he convened a farewell parade. He was dressed in his officer dress uniform, complete with his famous sword. We were a shadow of our former selves. Most of us had barely recovered from typhus. Some did not have uniforms. Despite this, we made an effort to give him the respect he deserved.

Csutoras was euphoric. He recounted in an orderly and detailed manner the experiences of the battalion from the moment he took command. Starting with the early training for the Engineering Corps, through the first advance to the front, the return to Hungary and the exit to Arkhangelskoya. He detailed the battalion's achievements and told of the praise he had received. He did not leave out a single place of the dozens of places we had passed through and stopped, and all the mountain passes the battalion had constructed according to his instructions. But he surprised us further with details we were not aware of, and told us, among other things, how he had circumvented racist Hungarian officers, who had encouraged him to do harm his soldiers.

Csutoras spoke of those who had contributed above and beyond the call of duty for the good of all. Among them he mentioned me and said that they all owe their lives to me, thanks to the tractor that

I had cobbled together to reinforce the roads and stopping us from being sent to the minefields.

Afterwards he spoke of 'the tragedy at Sumy'. "I behaved towards you as a father would for his own sons, and you treated me as sons would their father." He wept, and we all wept with him. What had begun as a formal military parade was awash with tears. But he spoke not only with emotion. He had a message for his fellow Hungarian commanders.

As he had done in the parade when he swore to protect us, this time, too, he said that the plot to destroy us would not succeed, and he ended his remarks in the hope that we would be able to return to our native Hungary healthy and hearty, and start families so we could tell our children and grandchildren our experiences in this terrible war.

We approached him one by one and parted from him with a handshake. Csutoras did not repeat his error and did not embrace or kiss us as he had when we returned from Sumy. He knew that the eyes of the other officers were scrutinizing him. His strong, long lasting handshake expressed it all. We would never again have such a commander.

The next day I went to say goodbye to him personally. Csutoras hugged me and promised that on his return to Hungary he would write to my mother. He had to tell her what an amazing son she had. "That will surely make her very happy." He kept his promise.

The Disadvantage of Free Time

Mano Klein, the redhead from Debrecen, moved with me into the village. The task we were assigned had its advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, we had mobility, we got food from the villagers, and we were not fettered to the battalion. On the other hand, this advantage was also a disadvantage: we were free to look inward and outside of ourselves at what was happening. Neither was easy.

I soon became friends with the Feldsher of the village. She filled in for the doctor and revealed to me that she was aiding the partisans hiding in the woods. She tried to persuade me in any way she could to get medicine for her from the battalion doctor. The most pressing one was the antibiotic, of course.

The family I lived with was welcoming. At night I slept on a pile of hay over the horse stable, and I spent the evenings with my hosts. "Keep away from the Feldsher," one of the girls of the family said to me one evening. "She's dangerous. She's fooled many men before."

She didn't want to elaborate or explain. I felt that it wasn't female envy but a real warning. Our ties with the partisans were ambivalent. The Germans were outwardly our common enemy, and defection to their ranks seemed more tempting as the retreat went forward. But the choice was between two alternatives, both with a high probability

of ending in death: to go with the current tide and confront the fate of the Jews of Europe, or to take a risk and join in the battle of the few against the many. After considering the options, I decided not to defect. It was a choice of being under the heel of two equally tyrannical masters. Jews who defected to the partisans labored as lumberjacks and water carriers. Their clothing made them stand out from the others, and their language identified them immediately as foreigners.

What's more, every defector had to prove that he was willing to risk his life for the cause. Most of those who tried to prove themselves were captured, and their fate was sealed. On the other hand, there were rumors that if Kessler's hangings continued, the partisans would attack the battalion and release all the condemned.

Whether this was wishful thinking or not, it soon did not matter. The battalion was ordered to advance towards the large city of Korosten, and Kessler was replaced. Klein and I rejoined our comrades.

A Mouth Shut with Cement

We reached Korosten under a new commander. Kessler had been replaced and thank God he was far away from us. We did not know yet if the new commander would run things like Csutoras or Kessler. In the meantime, we were split up into work groups, with each group sent to a different work site. The mission was again to aid the German war effort.

A contingent of about 70 was sent to work at a large bakery. There were bakers among them, including Bugler, who could not hold his tongue, and 'M', the mentally disturbed man. Since the disaster that had befallen him, he had shown violence and cruelty to his comrades, and all our efforts to calm him down had failed. We understood his rage but saw no logic in the viciousness being directed at us. In the end, we were all in the same boat.

In the bakery, 'M' was put in charge of 12 workers. The Hungarian commanders liked the fact that he was turning against his comrades. It amused them and made their job easier. What's more, one of the men who were subordinate to 'M' was Bugler, the baker. His ceaseless complaining of grievances drove 'M' even crazier. To this day I prefer not to give his real name, so as not to sully his memory. He felt that all the terrible things that had happened to us were nothing compared

to what he had gone through, when he failed to save his parents from death. But the punishments he inflicted on his subordinates were shocking.

One day 'M' put Bugler outside in the sun and plastered cement over his mouth to stop the complaints. He was later prosecuted in Israel as an accomplice to war crimes. Bugler settled his account with him.

Thus it Shall be Done to all Traitors

I was assigned to a group that cut down trees to pave roads and strengthen passageways. At this point in the war, when the tide was turning in favor of the Russians, the Ukrainians also began to turn. From collaboration with the Germans, they changed sides. Many of them joined the partisans, hoping it would be to their credit when the Russians came back. Partisan attacks in the area increased significantly.

One day, when we had finished loading trees on a train and it was pulling out, the partisans set off explosives on the tracks. The carriages with their occupants were hurled in the air and their bodies scattered everywhere. By pure chance, all those killed were Hungarians, not a single Jew.

The Hungarians' conclusion was definitive: the Jews must be cooperating with the partisans. They came up with a solution they thought would be effective. Moving forward, every locomotive would push a car in front of it that had only Jews in it. If a bomb exploded on the tracks, the Jews will be the first to be hit. They failed to understand that the charges were set off remotely.

Either luck or divine providence - take your choice – enjoyed toying with us. Two days later, a train loaded with trees - the locomotive

pushing a carriage filled with Jews - hit a land mine. The "Jewish" car was torn off the train, flew through the air, and landed back squarely on the tracks and continued to travel at tremendous speed for ten kilometers. None of the Jews were injured, while the other cars with the Hungarians suffered severe casualties. Their comrades were furious and vented their rage upon us with beatings and harsh punishments. Hungarian fury was unleashed in all its savagery against us.

Many of my friends had been so used to beatings that their feelings were dulled, and they were indifferent to the injustice of this unfair and vicious punishment. I, however, was filled with rage that I could not express. It has remained forever locked inside me.

On one of the following days, I came across the head of the kolkhoz and his two assistants from our previous location where I had been the coordinator. The meeting was warm and emotional. They then told me that they had been instructed by the Germans to come to Korosten to take back the corpse of the Feldsher. She turned out to be a double agent, spying for the Germans and at the same time helping the partisans.

The Ukrainians were put in charge of the interrogation. For three days, they tortured her. In the end, they extracted a detailed confession from her about her actions and those who had assisted her. The head of the kolkhoz suggested that I come with them to identify the body, which had been mutilated beyond recognition. I declined. I was thankful I did not get involved with her, and I blessed the peasant girl who had warned me against any dealings with the Feldsher. The return of the body was a warning to the villagers: "Thus it shall be done to all traitors."

The Ukrainian Wheel Turns

Korosten was the headquarters for the Ukrainische Hilfspolizei, the Auxiliary Police, which was a unit of Ukrainian collaborators. They wore black uniforms, and their mission was to capture partisans, murder Jews, and guard strategic locations. Their cruelty and racism were notorious, and their utter identification with the Nazi worldview caused the Germans to trust them. This was also due to the fact that these 'policemen' betrayed their own people, who were fighting the Germans. If they found partisans in any village, the entire village, as well as the neighboring one, was set ablaze and burned to the ground.

For us, the Ukrainische Hilfspolizei meant terror and trouble. Its men did the dirty work for the Germans, including the extermination of Jews. They gathered the victims, put them in ghettos, sent them to concentration camps, lined them up in front of death pits and shot them. The most famous of these pits was at Babi Yar near Kiev. After the war, it was revealed that 900,000 Jews had been murdered on Ukrainian soil.

Now that the Russians were advancing and the Germans were retreating, the Ukrainians were between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, if they did not carry out the tasks assigned to them, the

Germans would eliminate them. On the other hand, with the arrival of the Russians they would be executed for treason. Indeed, many were later prosecuted as war criminals. We made every effort possible not to come across them. If these anti-Semites got their hands on a Jew, they would torture him to death. They once captured some of the men in our battalion, but the villagers reported it, and the new commander rescued them at the very last minute.

The Heroes in the Corn Fields

Prince Pauli was the only son of one of the richest Jews in Hungary. A wealthy assimilated Jew with vast holdings; the owner of a railway car manufacturing plant, steel factories, and more. The men in Prince's battalion knew he was a rich man and they harassed him. By coincidence, we met in Korosten. He must have heard about and determined that I could help him. After telling me about himself and the harassment he was going through, he asked me to help him transfer to our battalion. It was the only battalion that would survive and return to Hungary, he said.

And he did not merely ask. He promised that on his return to Hungary, his father would reward me handsomely.

I was embarrassed. Everything I did for my friends' sake I had done in the name of camaraderie. Should I help a stranger in return for a reward? But I could not ignore his repeated entreaties. I admired his tenacity and determination.

I asked the adjutant of the battalion what the possibility was of effecting his transfer to our battalion. He said I should speak with the battalion commander. In principle, if you write to division headquarters that someone has joined us, and they do not forbid it, the matter is settled.

I approached the commander. He knew me by virtue of my work with Csutoras and he agreed. I wrote to division headquarters that Prince Pauli had joined the 2nd Battalion, and as expected no response was received. No one bothered to comment on the letter. What did they care if some Jew spends borrowed time until his death in this battalion or another?

Pauli, for his part, behaved in an exemplary manner despite being "sponsored." He was stunned by our order, discipline, and diligence. These attributes were new to anyone who came from another battalion. The chances of our survival, he kept telling me, looked more and more promising.

The closer we got to Hungary the more the partisans increased their pressure, and our commanders used us as 'partisan scouts'. Our orders were first to go through the high corn fields with shotguns, to make sure that no partisans were hiding there. Then the method was further refined as we were sent in first, armed with shovels and pitchforks. The great heroes of the Hungarian army followed us. The idea was despicable: if we came upon partisans, they fired on us, and the Hungarians behind us shot back, with us caught in the line of fire.

Open Wounds

From Korosten we continued to Berdychiv and from there to Zhytomyr, two major centers of Jewish culture. Scholarly centers have existed there for centuries, and religious currents were formulated there that are still in existence today. There was not one Jew left in either of the two cities. We could not believe it.

Fear gripped us again. Did it make sense for the Germans to eliminate Ukrainian Jewry while Pauli and my comrades would not be harmed? We had seen Ukraine swept clean of Jews with our own eyes. The peasants had told us of the extermination of Polish Jewry in the concentration camps. Would the Nazis stop at that? What about us, the Hungarian Jews? We could only hope that the war would end before they killed us. And if it did not, then maybe they'd be kept busy defending their country. I always tried to see light at the end of every tunnel.

There was a central German headquarters located in Vinnytsia, on the banks of the Buh River. A huge army base was established there. The Werewolf camp was set up at Wehrmacht headquarters and the runway for a military airport was built on the site for the Luftwaffe. Generals fought their battles against the Russians from there, and Hitler also visited Werewolf. All these conditions dictated restrictions

on the Jews. It was forbidden for us to be within a 30 km radius from the camp, and we had to make a large detour to circle around it.

The Labor Force battalions, what was left of them, were no threat to Werewolf's formidable complex. In the depths of my consciousness, I understood the real reason for keeping us at a distance. We were not dangerous - we were superfluous creatures in the world that the Nazis created for themselves. These racists called it a "new order." The realization that the Nazis were actually bent on wiping out the Jewish people from the face of the earth emerged from even deeper in the depths of repression and denial and stared us in the face as stark reality.

We were supposed to board freight cars here. Due to our lack of importance, we waited on the tracks for days. It was better than having to march for additional weeks or months. The distance from Arkhangelskoya to Vinnitsa was more than a thousand kilometers. We had already proven beyond any doubt that we knew how to march. The closer we came to Hungary, the more we longed to be reunited with our families and feel the warmth of being home again. We looked around us and saw the enormous changes that had taken place in all of us.

After several days we were finally on a train that took us in the direction of home. Maybe the war would be over for us? Would we be released and reunited with our loved ones?

With the realization that the battalion was about to disband and we would be dispersed to our homes, came the desire to close any open wounds. We felt the need to calm the anger among men who had reluctantly gone through a grueling and cruel journey together. We decided to put six people on trial whose behavior was extremely inappropriate. We considered that in times of war and distress, it is natural for everyone to take care first and foremost of themselves.

But that was not the point in these cases.

One of the men in the battalion was a lawyer. He and a few other friends approached me and asked me to serve as a judge. I was stunned. Who was I to judge? I had no clue about legalities. The fact that you took great care of your comrades does not make you a judge. But they insisted. The fact that I had been able to navigate between them all and help each one without bias, made me seem suitable for the task. They silenced all allegations and suggested the lawyer prepare an 'indictment' and gather the evidence and appointed another judge to assist me.

It was a perilous undertaking.

We were subject to Hungarian military constraints. How can we suddenly take the law into our own hands and put people on trial for war crimes?

Our shared memories went back to the beginning of 1941. We brought up the case of 'Y', who in the starving town of Deliatyn, cruelly exploited the desperation of a young girl, and bought her body and virginity for a loaf of bread. Due to the mental roller coaster we were on, we had all allowed ourselves - on occasion - the behavior of 'eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we may die.' We all traded food for sex at times. But this was different. We were offended and outraged by Y's arrogance, for 'male dominance' over a young, religious girl who found herself lost in a terrible abyss.

Another defendant was 'M', who shook Franz Loli back and forth while he was hanging, until the muscles of his arms were torn, and who had covered Bugler's mouth with cement. Another man stood trial for repaying evil for good to the Russian woman farmer in the house where we were staying. He had stolen the last piglet that she and her daughters were keeping in time of need. He added more guilt to his crime when he invited us all to a party in honor of the occasion.

Comrades on Trial

Where would we set up the court? We were stuck on a train, under the watchful eye of the Hungarian commanders, and they would never agree to allow Jewish forced laborers to hold their own tribunals. If we were caught, we would probably face military court martial ourselves, for usurping powers we did not have. Under the extreme wartime conditions we were in, it could mean the death penalty.

After a word of advice from Bondi Krauss, the cook decided that the car where food was distributed was the most appropriate place for the proceedings. The Hungarian soldiers received their food first and would take it to a car separate from ours. It did not suit them to eat with Jews. After they left, the dining car was at our disposal.

We held preliminary discussions with the defendants for trial. They protested and objected vigorously. "You have no right. Who gave us the right to decide that they were worse than the others?" Everyone committed offenses. We persuaded them as politely as we could that it would be best to handle the charges internally, within the battalion. If they are judged and punished, the matter will be settled, and the unity of the battalion will not be affected. Otherwise, they will be separated from the battalion in disgrace. Having

no choice, they agreed.

The day of the trials arrived. Before me stood a defense attorney and a prosecutor and the indictments were read out. The trials were conducted properly, according to Jewish law, and I recorded the verdicts and sentences at the end. The Torah says that our teacher Moses took a black woman for his wife. His sister, Miriam, did not like this, and she came before him with her complaint. God punished Miriam with leprosy, but after Moses pleaded with God, he agreed to reduce the punishment. Moses and her father, Miriam's father, spat in her face. Miriam was punished with an insult, for offending another woman. The judges agreed that spitting was the appropriate punishment under the circumstances.

The convicted men were sentenced to stand in the dining car with their pants and underwear pulled down, facing backwards with their buttocks towards us. Everyone, after they received their food, passed by them, and spat on their backs, on each one of them.

It was awkward, but these were our options. No one gave up his turn. Everyone wanted most of all to settle accounts and protest these men's past offenses.

This may seem like a senseless punishment. However, in the situation we were living through, spitting on a comrade had tremendous significance. We, your friends through thick and thin, are disgusted by your actions.

When it was over, the backs of the convicted men were wet with spit and their faces gray with shame. I went to each of them, shook their hand, and said, "This was your atonement. You are one of us again."

As I said earlier, 'M' was put on trial in Israel in the 1950s for the war crimes he committed. The complainant was Bugler. Despite the trial and the spitting ceremony, he did not forgive. I was called to

testify at the trial, which took place in Tel Aviv. I spoke mainly about the severity of the incident in relation to everything else that took place in that horrible, insane reality. I also testified about the severe trauma 'M' experienced after seeing his parents led to their deaths as he stood by, helpless to save them. 'M' was sentenced to one year in prison, after which, he left Israel.

Once, There Was a Home

We crossed the Hungarian border in early December 1943, and from there we went by train to Kaposvar. When people heard we had returned from the Russian front, they gaped at us as if we had landed from Mars. Like everyone else who came back from the front we were put in quarantine for 21 days. The official reason was health: to ensure that we were not infected or infect others with any disease. The real reason was deeper: the Hungarian authorities wanted to soften the shocking impact we had on the populace. They feared that we would tell about what we saw, and they didn't want our friends or family to ask about what went on. It was not the maltreatment of the Jews that bothered them, but the humiliating defeat by the Russians. Hungary lost 150,000 troops on the eastern front, and this had a grave impact on morale at the home front.

We were also an attraction. Our battalion had survived almost intact, except for 80 men, to whom fate had been less kind.

Family members could visit us. We got to know the families of our friends of whom we had heard so much. We all exchanged experiences. I was embarrassed more than once when I was made the hero of some story.

Csutoras also came to visit us. We were all glad to see him. He

asked me, "Would you have believed that we would reach this day?"

"The whole time you were in command," I replied, "There was no doubt we would survive. From the moment you left, we were never sure we would."

He was moved. This was not flattery. It was only thanks to him that we had made it through.

The three weeks of quarantine were also a time for mental reckoning. Four years had passed since we were recruited; four years during which we gave our all to armies that deliberately and brutally murdered our people. We had been to Galicia, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. We witnessed unspeakable things and went through horrendous experiences. One issue went through our heads from the moment we were conscripted until now: will our fate be different from the fate of the Jews in the places we passed? Is it possible that these Germans, whose desire is the extermination of all Jews, will let us, the Jews of Hungary, survive? By early 1944, Hungarian Jewry had not yet been systematically exterminated leaving us all questioning "Will we be the exception?"

Immediately after release from quarantine, I went to Budapest with some of my friends, to the offices of the JDC, the aid organization set up by the Jews of America for their brethren in Europe. We expressed our fears to the heads of the organization about what awaited the Jews of Hungary. As I have said, by that time most of the Jews of Ukraine and Poland had already been exterminated in concentration camps and in other ways - millions of people. We told them only a little of the horrors we had witnessed. Their response was: "You're suffering from battle shock."

In retrospect, I try to recall those days and put myself in the shoes of those leaders. Did they repress any understanding of what awaited the Hungarian Jews? Did they really think that the Germans, because

of the cooperation of the Hungarians, would allow the Hungarian Jews to be spared? Were they clinging to naïve faith - a chilling reflection - in the rabbinical leadership that proclaimed that these were the days of the Messiah?

Today, it is clear to me that the Jewish community in Israel and American Jewry could have done more to save the Jews of Hungary. And of course, the Hungarian government, which cooperated in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of loyal citizens. By January 1944, the Americans were already in Italy, and Germany was far from its peak of power. In Bulgaria, the king and the government cooperated with the Germans but refused to extradite their Jews. In Hungary, almost no one reached out to help. Here and there nuns hid children in monasteries. Despite the power of the rabbis, Pope Pius XII did not make any attempt to stop the extermination of the Jews. On the contrary, a large percentage of the priests recognized the Pope's sympathy for German anti-Semitism. In many places, church bells rang joyously at the expulsion of the Jews, and their property was confiscated.

Mother

I had visited home twice since I was drafted. Discriminatory restrictions and laws had worsened since my last visit. I saw that only women, children, and older men remained of Lisichivo's Jewish community. Everyone was vulnerable and poor. As it was a rural area, there was no famine. The only exception was my younger brother David. He was studying dentistry in Pressburg and was wise enough to return to Hungary only after the conscription of the Labor Service battalions was completed.

Five hundred Parvoslaven families lived in the village, along with only about twenty Jewish families. Despite this, the town used to bustle with traditional Jewish life from the early morning. People devoted long hours to Torah study and prayer, but they did not neglect general studies or their daily labors. They were workers, content with their lot in life.

My mother, Rebecca, was an exceptional person, kind, and a fervent believer. Every day she read the Psalms, the songs of praise to god written by King David. One day, after I had returned to the village, she asked me gently why I did not put on my phylacteries. I answered her rebelliously that God did not want me to put on tefillin, otherwise I would not have had to give them up at Sumy.

"We do not hold the Creator of the world to account," she said, "but he holds us accountable."

She said that and acted. At the first opportunity, she gave a sum of money to a neighbor who was going to Budapest to buy me a new set of phylacteries. Her joy was endless when I went back to putting them on every morning.

That was mother.

She cared for those near and far, and for years took care of her ten children alone. My father, Ben-Zion Yeshayahu, had gone to the United States to help support the family. He wanted to get us out, but he did not succeed.

Until the Hungarians entered the area in 1939, Mother ran the house and the business. We leased fields in different locations, where we grew corn, potatoes, and fodder alternately. We also ran a grocery store, which catered to the needs of the town's farmers, which opened every day at five-thirty in the morning. And there was a dairy farm, which won awards and provided the town with necessities, milk, and dairy products. And there was also a flour mill on the banks of the river, which also helped to run the looms where sheep's wool was woven and prepared. And we also ground sunflower seeds into oil.

My mother presided over everything with a guiding hand. Every morning, she got up and prepared food for all the occupants of the house. In addition to her ten children and two maids, the house was open to anyone who needed food, whether he was a Jew who came through the village or a Christian. Our house stood on the path of a shortcut through the mountains, and everyone knew that with Rebecca Stern they would find hot food. And if mother learned of a family in the village that was in distress, Jewish or Christian alike, she immediately sent food to their home: flour, potatoes, and oats.

Her special personality was revealed from early in the morning,

when she put herself last in line for food, after the farm animals and after the dog and cats. In her devotion, she always quoted the Shema, the prayer that opens with the words: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the lord is One." and goes on with the words: "And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be sated." As if to say, "We are commanded to care first for those for whom we are responsible, and only then for ourselves."

Along with her practicality she had a spiritual side, with a great love for music and poetry. Whoever sang well, won her over completely. If a beggar came to the house and it turned out that he was a singer, he was housed in a room specially designated for guests, his clothes were laundered, and he was fed to the full. In the evening, my mother would sit next to the man and listen to him singing. She wrote down the lyrics in a special notebook and then sang them to the members of the household.

Mother was an address for Jews and Christians who needed financial help. In cases where someone had difficulty giving birth and the local midwife could not solve the problem, mother sent for a doctor from out of town and paid his fee. And when once she learned of a Jewish girl who needed an abortion, and that it could be done discreetly only in Budapest, 400 km or more from Lisichivo, my mother paid all the expenses.

She also treated our household help as family and taught us to do the same. When a maid got married, mother bought her all the necessities, from food provisions to bedding, as if she were her own daughter. Once a maid's husband came to visit and kissed her hand. He bowed and said, "No one knows how to cook and run a household like my wife. I am a happy man thanks to you. She learned everything from you."

There were good neighborly relationships between Jews and

Christians throughout the years. This changed with the entry of the Hungarians, but even when our financial situation deteriorated, and many turned their backs on the Jews, my mother continued to help the poor, whatever their religion.

By the second half of 1944, when the Germans deported Hungarian Jews to the ghettos, Mother was already ill and exhausted. She called me to come to her and said: "Shmilka, you have come back from hell and you are going to hell. Don't worry about me. I've lived long enough and perhaps it is better if I die. Take care of the women in the family who have been left without a husband. She meant Elka, my sister-in-law and her two young children, Willie and Naomi. Her husband, my brother Pinchas, was also taken into the Labor Service, and communication with him had been lost.

She also meant my sister-in-law Frieda, whose husband Avraham – Bumi – had also been conscripted, and my younger sister Henya, whose health was poor, and our sister Leah, who attended a religious boarding school. In her worst nightmares, Mother could not imagine what her family would go through next.

It has been said that the importance of home is paramount. It is the well from which a person draws his strength, and that was my mother. She was the personification of home. She was the well from which I drew my emotional strength, and I believe that it was thanks to her that I survived.

Willie and the Suitcase

The future looked bleak. Although I had fulfilled my duty to the country, I felt I was under constant surveillance by the Hungarian gendarmerie; they were watching my every move. The plan to eliminate all the Jews by means of the Labor Service had failed in my case, and I realized that a "plan B" was in store for me.

The atmosphere in the town was also different. They were after our blood. One of the instances that illustrated this took place in a tool factory located in the village and had been purchased by a Czech of German descent. One day the owner's brother showed up at the factory wearing a polished SS uniform. He sought to recruit volunteers from the town to the SS and succeeded in getting two volunteers. They had to prove their determination through tests of courage, and one of them broke into our barn and tried to steal hay. I went out to him. I knew him and reminded him that the relations between Christians and Jews in the town had always been good. He answered me rudely: "Those days are past. Your lives and property are forfeited. Soon you won't be here anymore." The argument became a melee. He attacked me with a pitchfork, and others came in and pulled us off each other. A second occasion was in a neighbor's home. The slaughter of a pig was a cause for celebration in the town,

and a reason to have a festive gathering. I was invited, but when I entered the house, one of those present came at me with a knife and snarled: "What is he doing here?" He demanded of the hostess, "He's a Jew!" The woman came to my defense and tried to separate us. I told him I did not need a knife to break his bones with my bare hands, but the others around us stopped the brawl.

Despite the general feeling of gloom, I tried to comfort myself as well as others. The future could be bright after all, I said. We must fight for our own country, Eretz Israel. Every time I spoke about it, four-year-old Willie, my brother Pinchas' son, would cling to my side. He came to us with his mother and sister. They pretended to be Christians, and little Willie had made the long and dangerous journey to Lisichivo inside of a suitcase with small ventilation holes. Since then, every time someone came to the house with a suitcase, he had to empty it out. Willie would check to see if the suitcase was big enough for him to hide in. Despite his young age, he had a strong survival instinct.

He was very sociable and talked all the time. My sister-in-law had instructed him to keep quiet and not to cry inside the suitcase, and he did it perfectly. But not surprisingly, he was full of fear. He sensed that his family was in mortal danger. The idea of moving somewhere else, more secure, fascinated him.

In Memory of Suri

The Neuman family lived in the town of Zhdenijevo, seventy kilometers away. Shlomo Neuman was a wealthy man thanks to his thriving lumber business. He purchased and cut down forests, shipped the logs all over the country and beyond its borders, and employed some two thousand workers. He was a man of the world. One of his daughters, Suri, was a good friend of my sisters-in-law, and when she came to visit, she loved to hear stories about my period of service. I did not spare her my bleak view of the future that awaited us. She was a gentle, intelligent girl, and listened without responding.

On one occasion, I asked Suri to share the substance of our conversations with her father. I also suggested to her that she try to persuade him to prepare a hiding place for his family in time. Eight-hundred-and-fifty-thousand Jews were living in Hungary, I said. It is not possible that the Germans will spare them.

The reply I received from Mr. Neumann through his daughter was polite but decisive: "It won't happen to us. There is nothing to worry about." I was frustrated; I was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. You don't believe me? You think I am making up what I have seen these past four years?

I was constantly thinking of ways to escape and save myself. But

my escape meant abandoning my mother, my sisters, and sisters-in-law in exchange for saving myself. I was trapped.

It wasn't long before those who would not see or denied the reality of our destiny, grasped what was happening.

On March 19, 1944, the Germans invaded Hungary. Hitler was afraid that the Hungarians would break the alliance with him and align with Russia, and he decided to get one step ahead of them. In a single day, severe restrictions were imposed on the Jews, following orders that came straight from Adolf Eichmann. He was the head of the Jewish division in the Gestapo, and one of those directly responsible for the extermination of the Jews.

According to the new decrees, a large Star of David had to be marked on the doorstep of every house inhabited by Jews. The Jews were ordered to wear a yellow, six-pointed Jewish star on their clothing, and they – we - were forbidden to travel by train or go out of the house at night.

We knew it was happening. Confining the Jews in a designated area, requiring the wearing of the yellow badge, and restricting their movement were always how the extermination process began.

One night there was a loud knock on our door. Shlomo Neumann stood on the threshold. He collapsed to the ground sobbing, pouring out his terrible remorse for not listening to my warning. Now he would be willing to spend all his fortune to find safe refuge for his family. He asked my advice on what to do and where to go.

"There is nowhere," I said. "It's too late,"

We sat together in despair. Neumann wept and cursed himself for his complacency and stupidity.

I could not comfort him or raise his spirits. He hurried home before daybreak. If he were caught, it would have been the end for him.

He was beyond help. Shlomo Neumann was sent to Auschwitz with his entire family. His wife and six of his children were immediately murdered in the gas chambers. Although he was a relatively older man, he survived for a long time and died extremely near the day the camp was liberated, as did his remaining son. Suri marched in the notorious Death March. As she sat down exhausted to lace up her shoes a tank passed her and cut off her legs. She bled to death. I loved her very much. The time and circumstances did not suit courtship and romance. As I will relate further on, I, too, would march in a Death March. Suri's sweetness and charm often come to my mind. To this day I cannot forget her, nor would I ever wish to do so.

Things Must Get Worse Before They Can Get Better

It was clear to me that soon we would be herded into a ghetto and from there to the unknown. My only chance was to escape immediately, but the exhaustion of four years of service weighed heavily on me. I had returned home only two months before, and the harsh reality did not allow for real rest. As had happened many times during the war, I was again faced with awful options and I had to choose one of them. I also had to muster prodigious mental strength to overcome the physical fatigue. It took even greater effort to escape as I would have to abandon my mother, sisters, sisters-in-law and nephews and nieces to their fate.

After a few turbulent, sleepless nights I decided with my brother, Dudi, to run away together. We found a Christian farmer who agreed to hide us.

Before we left, a religious ceremony called "Little Yom Kippur" was held in the town. It was a day of fasting, prayer and asking for forgiveness, an event which took place eight times a year. I will never forget the heartrending prayer of that day. One of the townspeople, Leib Moskowitz, passed in front of the Holy Ark, wept, and exclaimed, "Oh Almighty God, save us." The windows of the synagogue

shuddered with his pleas. But the prayer did not help. God did not pay heed to Leib Moskowitz's pleas. Salvation was not forthcoming.

Soon afterwards, Moskowitz, along with the rest of the town's Jews, would be jammed into the Munkács Ghetto, then part of Hungary – today it is called Mukachevo and belongs to Ukraine. To spread fear and prevent any idea of rebellion, the SS would enter the ghetto and smash into the Jews with clubs. One day, one of them grabbed Leib Moskowitz by his beard and ripped it off, taking with it patches of his skin. In this condition he was herded onto the transport to Auschwitz from where he would not return.

It was the end of the winter of 1944 and severe restrictions were already in effect. The deportation to the ghetto and departure from there with no way back, was a matter of time. Hungarian Jews heard about the Warsaw ghetto uprising. They also heard about the extermination of the Jews of Poland and Ukraine. But even the darkest visionaries could not have imagined the magnitude of the catastrophe and the sheer number of the dead. The Nazi propaganda machine went to great lengths to obscure the truth of the most horrific killing machine in history.

This is perhaps the place to point out that Jewish leadership was nonexistent in Hungary and in most other countries. The secular leadership evaporated, and the rabbis proclaimed that according to the principles of religious redemption, "Things have to get worse before they can get better." Therefore, there was no need to resist. This attitude of 'men of faith' represented a monumental failure of leadership.

It is conceivable that if there had been better organization, strong worldwide protests, and attempts to rebel, the extermination could have been stopped, at least to a small extent.

One of the foundations of anti-Semitism is the belief that Jews

in all their scattered diaspora acted as a unified body. This concentrated force, the Nazis proclaimed, undermines Christian countries and acts against Christians as individuals. Therefore, Jews must be destroyed. The war came and proved exactly the opposite: the Nazis, with the help of enthusiastic locals in almost all the countries of the occupation, gathered up the Jews like eggs from a henhouse and sent them to their deaths. The Jews did not respond in any way as a coordinated whole.

A Sign of Life from Auschwitz

The Russians had pushed back the German army westwards and were now already on the western slopes of the Carpathian Mountains. We hoped they would cross the ridge and enter Hungary. It would not have been so great to be a Jew under Stalin's rule, but a Russian occupation would have spared the Jews of Hungary from systematic and organized extermination.

It was a dream. The Russians, for tactical reasons and particularly due to their historical enmity with the Poles, aimed their advance over two Carpathian bypass routes: a northern one through Poland, and a southern one through Romania. Along the way, they sowed havoc, devastation, and death, especially on the hated Poles.

From Auschwitz came a sign of life in the form of a postcard from my brother Noah, or Nandor, as everyone called him. We had long since given up hope that he was alive. His fate was unknown for many months. But the Germans wanted to sedate and confuse the Jews in the ghettos and small towns. From the inferno of the concentration and extermination camps, Jews were ordered to send postcards to their families telling them that "we're working and feeling well here."

Such trifling words, which could provide a glimmer of hope to the innocent, did not fool me. I knew this trick from the Labor Service. I

was clear-headed and skeptical by what I had seen and experienced in the past five years. I got ready to leave behind all that was dear to me in the home where I was born and lived till age 25. When I was 12, I had gone to study at a yeshiva in Pressburg but spent long vacations at my mother's house.

The children in our family all worked in the fields as well as performing household chores. Tending to the vegetable garden and the fruit trees, the domestic animals, and the flour mill, was an essential part of my connection to the house and my environment. I was attached to the animals, to the plants, even to the inanimate objects there. I needed to say goodbye to everything dear to me and to those around me.

Farewell to Scenes of My Childhood

I began my farewells with the trees that were planted close to the walls of the house. Our house as I have already described it, stood at the confluence of the tributaries of two rivers; the larger one everyone called Rika. It was always cold and swarming with trout. The smaller river was called Yablonka. It was warmer and home to other kinds of fish. The deep-rooted trees had been planted to stop the soil from eroding and undermining the foundations of the house when the rivers overflowed with melted winter snow. These trees, which created a protective wall around the house, were given dedicated care. I loved to watch the stream of water rushing by the house. Throughout my childhood, I enjoyed climbing the trees and making sure to prune them. I made flutes out of their smooth branches for myself, my family, and friends.

I had a special spiritual connection to all the parts of the house itself. I said goodbye to them all. The outer wall was lined with large stones. I had taken them out of the river during periods when it was shallow and placed them against the house for several reasons. The main one was the construction of additional protection from the water that flowed in the Spring with great force from the thawing mountain peaks. The second reason was to deepen the riverbed,

causing a slightly more moderate flow. It was hard physical work, most of which I did on my own. My older brothers had long since left the house and the maintenance work had almost completely fallen on my shoulders. I loved the work. It contributed to my physical toughness and strength and made me proud.

At front of the house, on the edge of the quiet river, we had planted extra tall trees. With careful pruning, we were able to make them grow even higher, and they were an attraction for anyone who came upon our beautiful town. We pruned them to lessen the shading on the house and more than once, when I climbed to the tops of the trees, my mother would come out of house, clasp her hands together in concern, and say: "How are you going to get down from there, Shmilka?" But I always made it back down safe and sound and never fell.

Among the many types of fruit trees were plums of all kinds. We also developed and created our own special varieties. They yielded hundreds of kilograms of fruit and were renowned in the region. We ate them and sold them fresh, made jam from them, dried them in the sun or cooked them in the oven for the winter.

There were also various walnut trees. We used the nuts for play and for eating, and lots of other trees that encircled the house with beautiful greenery. I felt a unique connection to each one. The black plum trees, for example, were a dwelling place for our chickens. To protect them from the foxes, we built a ladder that the chickens would climb up and spend the night nesting in the branches of the trees. The sight of the giant plum tree branches dotted with white and red specks of sleeping hens was a wonderful sight.

I built the fence that surrounded the yard and the house with my own hands. I sawed the pillars out of strong oak and sunk them deep into the ground. I carved the tops of the pillars in the shape of an arrowhead and inserted a wire to maintain uniform height of

the planks. I made sure all the nails were in a straight line, and the admiration of everyone who saw my fence filled me with pride and satisfaction. My heart ached as I now had to say goodbye to my fence.

When I was a child we had a lot of cows. My father would wake us up at dawn and take us to the barn to sip hot milk, fresh from the cows' udders. He believed that hot milk was good for the health of the lungs and body. We then spent long hours tending for the cows and cleaning the barn.

I also went to say goodbye to the willow tree planted by my brother Israel, whom we called Bari, shortly before he died from pneumonia, at age 12. This tree was a symbol and a source of pride. It rose and blossomed and was one of the "Four Species" we used at Sukkot and Hoshana Rabba holiday ceremonies.

I went up to the attic. In the closet there, Mom kept all our notebooks since first grade, and all the handicraft projects we made as toddlers: wood and metal work, paper and glue, which were an integral part of my childhood and that of my brothers and sisters.

The attic was the pantry for vegetables and fruits we picked in the fall and dried for the winter. There were piles of beans, corn, and dried fruit, and we treated them with dedication, with the help of our workers. Going up to the attic was like getting inside a large vault; it instilled confidence. Here, we had food for the whole winter. We were supplied and protected. All this went through my mind when I went up to say goodbye to the attic and all its treasures that we grew in faraway fields. They were irrigated by the streams that flowed down from the mountains, and we always had to check that some neighbor or other did not divert a ditch towards his plot.

I recalled my wonderful fishing experiences. Trout fishing was an enjoyable social activity and also a sporting event. The excess fish we did not eat were dried and salted, and preserved for the cold, hard

days of winter. The river would freeze solid in the Carpathian winter, and we could walk on it without fear.

I went from tree to tree, from animal to animal, from the fence posts to the foundation stones, from the yard to the attic and back. I had to say goodbye to each of these places and objects, because I may not be here again any time soon. But I did it in secret so as not to upset my mother. I imagined that if I, who was 25, felt such a strong connection to the home, and such pain on leaving it, that my mother would feel it with much greater intensity. These were the house, the yard, the animals, and the garden where she had spent years of loving labor. Here she had given birth to and raised ten children. I knew it would be heartbreaking for her.

Life at home was dictated by Mother. She was involved in every detail. Her soul and body were devoted to the house, and we also inherited from her the connection to the soil, the landscape, and the surroundings. This understanding increased her pain. I felt that the separation would be final and complete. It was clear that soon our home would be taken from us and we would be deported to a ghetto and sent to our deaths. There was no doubt that the hard work in the open country air contributed to our physical and mental resilience. It had helped us to withstand the hardships and suffering we went through during the war. Looking back, I also understood that the town where I was born and raised was special for its landscape and character. I see it in my dreams to this day.

Had it not been for the war, all this beauty would have faded away slowly in any case. Even before the war, young people spread their wings and began to leave. The town was not suited to the modern lifestyle that the period between the two World Wars offered young people. The first to leave was my brother Sigmund. He studied dentistry and moved to the big city of Pressburg. Pinchas, Nandor and Bomi had also left the town and each worked in his own field, in different places.

The Escape

The outcome of the war was already obvious when the Germans invaded Hungary. It was only a matter of time before Germany was defeated and had to surrender. The failures in the east and the capture of the German senior staff by the Russians, the victory of the British in the western desert of Africa and the defeats on other fronts the Germans were subjected to, all indicated that their surrender was imminent. There was no doubt that the Allies, led by the United States, were planning an overwhelming response, which would indeed come about in June 1944, in the form of the great Normandy Invasion, across the English Channel, along with aerial bombings.

But this did not stop the Germans from continuing to annihilate Jews, just because they were Jews. The experience they had gained in exterminating the Jews of Poland they now utilized in Hungary, and without a moment's hesitation. The decrees they imposed were clear. With the unification of the Hungarian-German forces, the Jews did not stand a chance.

The restrictions also made planning an escape more difficult. The obligation to wear a yellow star all hours of the day, the curfew at night, and the absolute prohibition to travel by train did not allow for moving from place to place. Dudi and I decided to flee into the

forest - as I said we had already found a farmer who had agreed to hide us in his house for twenty-thousand pengő, then worth about eight thousand dollars, a huge sum. We planned to hide there for a month-and-a-half until the snow melted. We could then survive outside.

The farmer's house was in the heart of a forest, near an observation post where Hungarian soldiers were tracking enemy aircraft. The enemy was our best hope. We toyed with the idea that we might be able to get the soldiers drunk, grab their weapons, and escape armed.

Today, looking back, I am amazed at my naïve thinking. The idea was totally unrealistic.

The Last 'Seder'

The holiday of Passover arrived. I celebrated a sad final Seder with my small family. In Jewish tradition, Passover is the Feast of Freedom and the Feast of Spring. Our forefathers left slavery in Egypt on a quest for freedom. In normal times, our extended family would gather around a festive table, laden with special foods in memory of the Exodus from Egypt and commemorating the 40-year journey through the Sinai desert, until they entered the Promised Land, the Land of Israel. On this holiday we eat matzah, which is unleavened bread. In their rush to freedom, the Children of Israel had no time to let the dough to rise, because they left in the middle of the night. And they made a mixture of sweet fruits, called charoset. Every Jewish housewife has her own secret recipe for it, which is of course, the best. Also, a spicy mixture of grated horseradish with red beets called Chazeret. And there were dumplings made from special Passover flour, which are served in freshly made chicken soup, and roasted beef in a rich gravy, all topped off with a sweet fruit compote.

Before and after the meal, the family members – children and adults - took turns reading the story of the Exodus from Egypt from the 'Haggadah,' the book recounting the Passover story. Everyone sang songs of praise about the miracles that God performed

to redeem the Children of Israel from slavery and the yoke of the Egyptians and return them to their ancient land.

The modest and melancholy celebration had an opposite feeling this time. We realized that we were leaving freedom behind and about to be taken into slavery. No one dared express their feelings verbally, the expressions on their faces said it all: hundreds of years of Passover Seders in the Carpathian Mountains were about to come to an end.

For Whom the Bells Were Ringing

When the holiday ended, Dudi and I packed a bag with very few belongings. We said goodbye to my mother and the rest of the family, and in between the tears of parting we pretended that we were confident we would survive. We left the house in the middle of the night and made our way to the farmer's house in the forest. The only sure thing was uncertainty.

The experience I had gained in the Labor Service battalion in the previous few years gave me hope that I would be able to adapt to changing circumstances and survive. We walked separately in a roundabout way into the forest so as not to encounter anyone. If one of us was caught, the other could still try to escape.

There was light in the window of the farmer's house. We knocked on the window according to the agreed signal, and the man, white as a sheet and trembling with fear, opened the door. His look showed us that he regretted the deal. We brought our belongings inside and went up to the attic. Before we went to bed we arranged things so that if anyone went upstairs they would not notice us. But our efforts to fall asleep were futile. The emotional separation from our loved ones and fears of what awaited us made us unable to close our eyes all night.

At dawn we ate from the food we had brought from home. We spoke with our hands or in whispers. The farmer's children did not know of our presence, and we made every effort not to 'know' of theirs, either. We defecated sitting on buckets filled with hay, so that all sounds were muffled, and at night we went down and cleaned out the buckets.

Our host came up to us several times. Each time he seemed more nervous and more troubled. The Germans repeatedly threatened to execute the entire family of anyone who hid Jews.

Dudi became stressed. He told me he felt chest pains. I tried to appeal to his logic and convince him that the pressure was due to stress, but I remembered that he, unlike me, had not experienced the horrors of war. He never had to deal with the terrible tension that war brings.

Dudi was a tall, handsome man with good interpersonal skills. He made friends easily, and people loved him. And he enjoyed the good life: women, food, hunting and fishing.

Now he was suddenly stuck in an attic, in the house of a stranger, an unfamiliar farmer, talking in signs and defecating into a bucket. We only had to last a month and a bit more, I told him. The trees will bloom and provide us with shelter. Potatoes will also start to ripen. But he had not yet internalized the change in our lives. Here I was, faced with another problem.

Almost a week passed and the church bells of Lisichivo and the surrounding villages rang out with joy. They had cleared the Jews out of the area. They had sent their Jewish neighbors to a ghetto and from there they would be sent to their death. Their homes and property could now be seized.

The villagers divided the houses of the Jews among themselves even before the deportation. Everyone knew in advance who was

going to get what. Our house, so dear to our hearts, went to the mistress of the commander of Gendarmerie. I later learned that she was standing outside the house urging my mother and family to move out faster.

It was the largest theft of property in history, carried out all over Europe, under the auspices of German racial laws. A disgraceful accompaniment of church music played in the background of the looting.

Our spirits again were shaken. The obvious regret on the peasant farmer's face weighed even more heavily. He had agreed to see the deal through for the money, but the ringing of the church bells had surprised him.

He surely must have said to himself: "All the Jews have been deported and I am rescuing two of them? They'll hang me."

A day later he came up in the attic with an ominous look on his face and asked to cancel our agreement. He was even willing to give us back some of the money. We had no choice but to leave. But where could we turn?

We waited for nightfall, feeling as if we had been left suspended in midair.

Surrender

Dudi turned to me suddenly. He recalled that one time, a farmer from Kushnytsya came to his dental clinic. The man's face was swollen, and his eyes inflamed from an infection in the root of a tooth. The farmer's head was wracked with pain and he was willing to pay any price for someone to relieve his agony. Dudi took care of it and the pain went away. The farmer got down on his knees and crossed himself. As is the custom of ordinary folk, he swore an oath he would be at his service in any time of need. We decided to go to this farmer and ask him to keep his promise. We knew his commitment might not be forthcoming, but we had nothing to lose.

We set off at midnight. Spring had begun, and torrential rain came down on us within minutes. We skirted around Lisichivo on narrow, hidden pathways, crossed over streams, and reached Kushnytsya, the next town nearest to Lisichivo.

On our way, we passed near the house of our Uncle Noah Kahan, our mother's brother. Uncle Noah's wolf dog recognized us by smell. He jumped on us with happy barks, licked our faces and ran from me to Dudi and back as if to say "How great you came. Everyone else has gone and left me here alone."

We were nervous. We had to get rid of the dog before his barking

attracted attention and betray us. With a heavy heart we threw stones at him until the poor dog was offended and went off.

We reached the farmer's house and knocked. The man stood on the threshold and looked at the two Jews on his doorstep and let us in. We were wet and hungry. His house was typical of all the peasants' homes: half was used as a residence and half as a barn. He took us up to the roof of the barn. The place was lined with dry hay. "Stay here for now and we'll see what to do tomorrow." We wrapped ourselves in our coats, and soon the fatigue overwhelmed us, and we slept.

We woke up in a panic when the farmer came up to us and shouted, "Run! They've come to get you."

Without thinking twice we jumped down and ran outside. It was morning. The farmer ran towards the town with the intention of betraying us. He had laid a trap for us. The fields were full of farmers. Everyone saw us fleeing from the barn and they all knew the Stern brothers well.

Our chances of finding refuge elsewhere were nil. A death sentence hung over our heads, but no one in the community where we had been born and raised reached out to help. At that moment I pictured what hardships my mother was enduring in the Irshava ghetto, where they had taken all the Jews from Lisichivo. There was not one man with her, her daughters, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren; no one to give them any kind of protection. Then my thoughts returned to our own predicament. Our first two plans of escape had failed. We looked at each other in the eyes and read there the same thought: "We have to surrender." And so we did.

Much later, when we were both in Auschwitz, we deeply regretted that decision. But at that moment we were between a rock and a hard place. We decided to go to the home of the head of the town council and give ourselves up.

We crossed the fields to his house. The head of the council did not conceal his surprise and disappointment in us that we were surrendering. We were Jews, but he liked us. "I have no choice," he said, "but to report you to the gendarmerie."

In less than ten minutes, the gendarmerie commander and his deputy arrived at the house, riding bicycles. They looked delighted at the sight of the spoils that had fallen into their hands. To emphasize the importance of their catch, they began interrogating us.

The subject of their investigation surprised me. I was sure it would be about our short, aborted escape. We assumed they would want to know who was willing to risk death for himself and his family for hiding us. I didn't believe my ears. The commander wanted to know where I had hidden my watch in the house where they robbed us two days before. Where were the festive suits we wore for Shabbat prayers in the synagogue? They would suit me fine, he said, for Sunday prayers at church. He would have no problem wearing stolen property while in prayer.

The thought crossed my mind that they considered us greedy and avaricious, even though we Jews worked for a living while the Slovaks got drunk on alcohol. It did not interest the commander that thousands of Jews in his area of responsibility were being led to their deaths. He was interested in my watch and fancy suits.

At the end of the interrogation, his lieutenant turned to me and said: "I am not surprised that your brother gave himself up. He is a spoiled child. But you, who went through all that you did, reaching the Don River and surviving, among the very few who did survive, and you give yourself up instead of escaping?"

My tongue stuck to my palate and my mouth was dry. I was overwhelmed by a sense of defeat and despair. I stammered that I wanted to help my mother while she was still alive; that she needs me by her side.

I knew I had made a terrible mistake. The commander called his superior's headquarters and solemnly declared that he had captured two partisans. He asked for reinforcements and handcuffs.

You Will Not Shackle Us

Two large and threatening looking military policemen tried to handcuff us. I resisted with force. "We have given ourselves up," I said. "There is no fear of us running away. You will not shackle us. We will not be humiliated."

There was a brief debate. "I have no weapon and you have guns," I said. "If we run, you shoot and kill us. You will not shackle us."

They could have used more force and subdued us, but they gave up. They led us through the streets of Kushnytsya to the train station.

It was a shameful, painful journey. It hurt because we were leaving our beloved childhood surroundings. We were sure we were walking our last path and would never see this landscape again. It was shameful because the news spread like wildfire. Along the way and at the train station, scores of people watched us with curiosity mixed with pity. The residents of Kushnytsya knew us and knew who we were. They also knew what awaited us. Some looked on with obvious joy. They hoped that the takeover of Jewish property would enrich them. It was nonsense. The Jews had contributed to the development of the region in all ways. In the decades since the war, the area has only declined.

I closed my eyes so as not to see the sights around me. I could not

help but think of the good years living alongside the Christians, until the last few months. We knew that some of our neighbors were racist. It dawned on me then, in the most sorrowful way, that we had not correctly assessed their number and intensity.

Before we boarded the train, the commander of the gendarmerie gave instructions to the sergeant and his accompanying corporal that it was forbidden for us to sit by the window and we were not allowed to sit next to each other. The commander feared that if we would talk and plan an escape, and if we sat by the window, we might jump off the train.

At the next station, a group of high school students boarded. Two of their women teachers began to taunt us with the litany of our "crimes": "You sucked our lifeblood, you lent money at usurious interest; you cheated us and lied to us. When we were hungry you had abundant food. You wore fancy clothes while we were naked. And you even crucified the son of Mary." The classic anti-Semitic repertoire the church had indoctrinated them with.

We kept silent, but the atmosphere in the railroad car was heated. Luckily for us, there were gendarmerie guarding us. They may very well have saved us from a lynching.

He is Worthy of the Bread Made from the Fine White Wheat That Grows on the Rich Black Soil of Hungary

The commotion at the train station in Irshava was terrible. The Germans and Hungarians had developed an effective method of "cleansing" huge areas of land from Jews; they concentrated the Jews from a small area into a relatively small local ghetto, against their will, of course. The Jews were then transferred by train from these several small ghettos to one large ghetto. The station in Irshava was filled with masses of Jews on their way to the ghetto in the city of Munkács. Old men, women and children crowded the platform. Those who were ill lay on makeshift stretchers while family members fed them and tended to them. They were all carrying bundles with their meager possessions. The gendarmerie harassed them with shouts and clubs to board the railway cars. The German system of repression worked well - the Jews were completely helpless.

At the head of them all stood an older lieutenant colonel. He gave orders to a young officer to move things more quickly on the platform with the gendarmerie. Our two escorts approached the senior officer and saluted. The sergeant said: "I humbly announce that I have brought two partisans for the Irshava ghetto." The officer looked at

him angrily and shouted, "Partisans for the ghetto? Take them aside and shoot them." I looked at Dudi and understood what I, too, must have looked like. He was white as a sheet and was trembling like a leaf. Despite the awful fear, my experience taught me that this was a fateful moment. I gathered my courage and got hold of myself. I took a step forward and saluted the lieutenant colonel. "Even the worst criminal deserves one last request," I said. "Please read the letter I have here."

I pulled the letter Csutoras had written to my mother out of my pocket at the end of my military service. It was the letter that Csutoras had promised to send and he kept his word. The lieutenant colonel was dumbfounded at my audacious request, but he held out his hand and took the letter. It was written in neat, decorative handwriting. In it, he showered me with praise. Csutoras described my devotion to the soldiers of the battalion and that many lives had been spared thanks to me. Fortunately for me, he was from the previous generation, an idealist at heart. The letter, which held the key to my fate, was worded in an exaggerated, flowery style. It ended with a quote that every educated Hungarian knew, from the poem of the Hungarian national poet Sandor Petofi: "He (that is, me) is worthy of the bread made from the fine white wheat that grows on the rich black soil of Hungary."

A twist in the usual plot: a Hungarian officer praises a Jew as a worthy Hungarian.

The lieutenant colonel looked at me, taking my measure from head to toe. The passing seconds felt like an eternity. How will this cold-blooded creature, who is sending thousands of people to their deaths without a care, react to such a letter? Finally, he ordered the gendarmerie: "Send them to the ghetto." I remembered to reach out and ask for my life insurance policy back. The officer returned the letter to me.

The Sacks of Flour in the Munkács Ghetto

Reuniting with my mother, my sisters, sisters-in-law and the young nephews and nieces was thrilling. For a moment we could forget our surroundings and what awaited us, and we allowed ourselves to revel in the joy.

The ghetto was on the outskirts of the city with thousands of Jews crammed into the houses and stables. The almost complete absence of young men and lack of leadership created a sense of helplessness.

Munkács was a large county town. We were led to a huge brick factory inside the ghetto compound, and each family went to a corner and put their belongings there.

The atmosphere was grim. The uncertainty, the overcrowding, the lack of privacy, and not even minimally sanitary conditions, took their toll. Depression and fear of the future motivated people to flee into extended sleep. Each family set up 'guard duty' for themselves. Someone must always be awake to warn of trouble.

There were SS men and Swabian German all around, drunk with power and seething with anti-Semitism. They preyed on the young girls, the old and the weak, and anyone unfortunate enough to fall into their clutches would in most cases be crippled. Their job was to sow terror, to prevent organization and resistance. We already knew

of this German tactic, designed to make people lose their sense of humanity and self-confidence and to lose all desire to struggle. They also knew that starving and exhausted people could rebel out of desperation, and a makeshift "kitchen" distributed a little food.

Jews who were drafted into the Judenrat, the German-appointed council for the Jews, functioned as threatening policemen. They were forced to carefully follow the instructions of the Germans, to make sure that everyone complied with their orders and meet the quotas of workers for the difficult tasks. I was relatively young and sturdy, and I was afraid that I, too, would be forced to fill this terrible role. Luckily, I was sent to work in the supply warehouse.

After a few days word spread that a meeting would be held where important decisions would be made. I made sure to be there. Jews who previously held senior positions, public and private, mingled with the common people. Some of the former leaders were still properly dressed as in their previous status, gold chains and at the end of which were gold watches over their bellies. Some of them smoked cigars. It was not amusing. Once again I realized that the so-called big, smart people do not correctly assess the situation. These people refused to internalize the fact that a life-threatening calamity was hovering above them and above us all. The war, which was taking place somewhere far away, would soon end for them. Jews have nothing to do with it so there is no reason to worry. Life would soon be back to normal. And they would return to their former positions, their offices, and their homes.

They said these things with a look of self-importance. One of the speakers noted that the ghetto leaders had three-quarters of a million sacks of flour. He calculated that according to the number of people in the ghetto, and assuming that the war would continue for another year, there would be no hunger or scarcity in the ghetto as long as they did

not allocate more than 200 grams of flour per person per day.

All the wisdom of the leaders and bigwigs did not take into consideration the systematic German deception. To distract attention from the extermination plans, the Germans had told the leaders that there was a great deal of food in the ghetto and the leaders swallowed the bait.

As always, two Jews had three opinions. Every opinion expressed was opposed, voices were raised and there was great commotion. I asked permission to speak.

I started by telling them of my years in the Labor Service battalion. I told them about what I had witnessed, about the concentration of Jews and their extermination in Poland and in Ukraine. I described the magnitude of the disaster.

In cities that had been bustling with Jews, there was not a living soul left among our people. I explained to them that there was no point in limiting the quota of food. It should be distributed as generously as needed. Knowing the Germans, sacks of flour saved for the future could be confiscated in a moment for the war effort. I asked if there was anyone present who would dare to stand up and resist them. Our fate will be the same as the fate of the Jews in the other lands, I said. The relentless German plan to wipe the Jews off the face of the earth had not been suspended. The sacks of flour were a smokescreen.

A loud argument ensued, until the leader of the meeting banged on the table. He looked at me scornfully and said, "Sit down, you upstart, what does a nobody like you know about anything?"

I sat down. I knew all was lost. Even the smartest and most successful businessmen cannot see the obvious. I have already spoken about the leadership needed in such difficult times - and there was none.

Evacuation from the Ghetto

It was not long before the "reassuring" information about the sacks of flour became a bitter joke. Two days after the meeting, trains of ten to fifteen freight cars started arriving at the Munkács station and parked on the side tracks. SS men began to abduct people on the streets, shouting and beating them up, throwing them into the railway car with sixty, seventy and even a hundred people crammed into each one. The trains departed for an unknown destination. It is shocking to recall that some people volunteered to go out on the first departures. They believed the trains would take them to a better place.

The religious Jews, who were the majority of the ghetto residents, believed that everything that happened was punishment for their sins. Religion has the capacity to convince its believers that their faith was not strong or dedicated enough. These believers saw in their troubles a decree from the heavens. Some saw it as God testing their faith, as he had tested Job. Others clung to the belief that God's actions were beyond human comprehension. These conceptions of religion had a decisive weight in the fact that almost no revolts in the ghetto was organized. Not in Munkács and not in most of the other ghettos; not in Hungary or in any other occupied country. The strong

religious concept of complete dependence on God rendered the Jews completely passive.

I knew then, and it is clear to me today, that collective resistance could have been of great value. Half a million Hungarian Jews were concentrated in the ghettos and loaded onto trains, and this was accomplished with a relatively small number of German-Hungarian forces. Every soldier that met no resistance sent hundreds and possibly thousands of people to their deaths. The war was coming to an end. Any delay would have been welcome. Any commotion could have saved lives. In the ghettos it was possible to rebel. Later in the concentration camps, the possibility of rebellion became much more difficult. But now, in the face of zero resistance the SS simply 'went by the book', exactly according to the plans dictated by Berlin.

I decided to put myself in a good spot in the middle. I was not pushed among the first and was not among the last. It later turned out that those who were sent on the first transports from the Munkács ghetto were assigned to the "Sonderkommando" - the "special unit" - in Auschwitz. Their job was to clear out the corpses from the gas "showers" and heave them into the mass crematoria to be burnt. The Sonderkommandos themselves were murdered in the gas chambers after three months of work. Six of them were from Lisichivo, among them Avraham Moshe Rosenberg, who would shout out to his daughter who worked on the other side of fence, the names of those who were gassed that day, and who was already dead until he was sent to the crematoria.

On the Way to the End of the World

The inevitable arrived. Our turn came to board the train. Everyone from Lisichivo stood tightly packed so that we would be placed in the same car. We knew we were on our way to a dead end and wanted at least a final sense of community – to be united until the end. Everyone felt terror in their hearts, but no one was able to say the words out loud: "The Germans are sending us to Poland to kill us all."

These were freight cars for cattle, each with four small openings. The SS terrorized us with violence and shouting on the platform, People tried to get into the cars quickly, so as not to be dealt a blow from a rifle butt to the head or the ribs. Old people and children needed help to climb up onto the elevated cars. Ferocious wolf dogs, or German shepherds as the breed is known, strained at their leashes, ready to leap and attack anyone who dawdled or got out of line. This allowed the Germans to control a large mass of people with a small force, and the cars filled up quickly.

Once inside, we saw that the situation was worse than we thought. We were not much better off than facing the blows of the SS. We could barely breathe it was so packed. Then the doors slammed shut and were locked from the outside. The train pulled out.

At first we tried to allocate a corner for a chamber pot. Women put up a blanket to shield it from view and one pot served as a toilet. But the pressure, the fear and shaking of the train increased the need to urinate and defecate. Men and women of all ages lost all shame and defecated in front of everyone. People vomited on each other. The force of circumstances brought with it a numbing of the senses.

The inhuman overcrowding was part of the same Nazi goal of stripping those being led to their deaths of their self-esteem and respect for others. Some people lost all desire to struggle and survive. Upright and jammed in the cattle car made it clear that we were on our way to the slaughterhouse.

Each family tried to find a place for themselves. Girls, boys, parents, grandparents, siblings, all clung to each other. Occasionally the train stopped on a siding to clear the way for the military transports. The doors opened for a moment so we could empty the toilet. SS soldiers, their weapons aimed and at the ready, guarded the door. Escape was impossible.

Our cattle train left Hungary in May 1944. The Germans were already experienced in dealing with escape attempts from passenger trains. German soldiers were stationed on the roof of every third or fourth car, and anyone who tried to escape was shot. At night they fired randomly into the air, to augment the fear and panic.

In the areas where the train slowed down, and at the stations where it stopped, Slovak villagers asked us to throw our valuables out of the car. They explained apathetically that we were being led to slaughter. For the message to be clear, they made a gesture of cutting their throats. No one offered help; no water, no food, no helping us to escape. They had already taken over the houses and property of the Jews, and now they wanted what few possessions people had managed to take with them on their final journey. Maybe they had

hidden jewelry or diamonds? Or personal keepsakes?

What's the problem? After all, everything you have you stole from the Slovaks. This is what they were taught from childhood.

The Bombs not Dropped

Any glimmer of hope was welcomed. We hoped the Allies would blow up the railroad, we hoped the train would break down, or we would be saved in some miraculous way. The reality was different. Today we know that by mid-May 1944, five hundred thousand Hungarian Jews were concentrated in the ghettos. On May 15, their deportation to Auschwitz began. The progress of the Red Army towards Budapest sped up the German's extermination plans. They made every effort to stop the Russians, but even as their resources diminished, they would not give up the racist madness of annihilating the Jews.

By July 1944, half-a-million Hungarian Jews had been taken to Auschwitz. Most of them were no longer among the living. As I have written before and will again, it is sad to think that the Allies knew about what was happening and did nothing to stop the massacre. In mid-1944, American and British bombers flew close to Auschwitz. On the way from Hungary to Auschwitz, the railway passed over several large bridges. If the Allied planes had blown up these bridges, the extermination would have been delayed and perhaps even stopped. With a dozen bombs they could have destroyed the gas chambers and put the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz out of commission. But

the Allies preferred to concentrate their efforts on the German army, rather than "waste" bombs on rescuing the Jews.

We, who had been in the Birkenau-Auschwitz complex since the Spring of 1944, heard the thundering engines of the aircraft dropping bomb day and night. We looked up to the sky and longed for a miracle. It was not to be.

After the war, it became clear that one of the central arms within the American governmental departments was out-and-out anti-Semitic. This department prevented the bombing of the railroad tracks. If the prisoners in the extermination camps had not been Jews, things might have been different.

Before the war broke out, there were approximately 725,000 Jews living in Hungary. One-hundred-fifty thousand were left after the war. Half-a-million Jews were murdered, as I stated during the Spring and Summer of 1944. Another 75,000 died or were murdered in the Labor Service battalions and elsewhere. At the height of the exterminations in Auschwitz, twenty thousand people were slaughtered every day. The world was silent.

It is true that the Allies fought the Germans and defeated them. It is true that the Allies represented the forces of light against the darkness. But racism and anti-Semitism were not only on the German side. A dozen, or at the most, fifty bombs could have saved hundreds of thousands of people from blood thirsty madmen gassing them to death.

But we were still on the train. The body of anyone who died in the car was moved to the side and remained with us all the way to Auschwitz. The atmosphere was one of death and despair. The women wept and lamented. The men prayed "to the merciful God," crying out "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" There was no food available, and even if there had been, no one would have been able to eat it.

After seven days and seven nights of a living nightmare, we reached the outskirts of Auschwitz. Today, people ask why we did not rebel when the train stopped, knowing that we were doomed, anyway? The answer is clear: the long journey in the crowded cattle cars, the humiliation, the loss of privacy, the dead and sick relatives, the weakness from hunger and thirst, the needs of the babies and young children, the suffering of the elderly, the crying, the sorrow, the filth, the stench simply broke people's will. All of us were exhausted and numb from standing for days. In our minds there was not the faintest glimmer of a desire to struggle.

Knowing that death was near also paralyzed us. To rebel we would have had to unite.

This was not possible under the conditions that we had been subjected to. A very few individuals, with extraordinary courage and luck, managed to jump off the train.

In the Shadow of Birkenau's Smokestack

Moving slowly, with many stops, the train covered the short distance left to arrive at Birkenau. A German officer stood on the platform. Under his command were several lower ranked SS men. Jewish prisoners urged us out of the cars, screaming "Raus, raus, out, out!" The screaming was accompanied by beatings from the SS. The blows were suffered most by those who had difficulty getting down. After seven days and nights in a cattle car, there were many who had trouble moving. And as they had when we boarded the train, the Germans again deliberately generated terror.

The Jews who were forced to work in the service of the Germans also behaved cruelly. "Stupid Hungarians," they shouted. "You lived well until now! You ate, drank and were with your families. You weren't interested in what was happening to the Jews of Poland. Now it is your turn to die." It was abominable. They treated us as if we were the enemy.

Before I got off, I suddenly heard the thin little voice of Willie, my four-year-old nephew. "Uncle Shomo," he asked. "Did we come to Palestine?" I was stunned. When I had spoken about the hope that one day we would have a country of our own, a country where no one would persecute us, it never occurred to me that little Willie

understood my words and had fabricated himself an illusion.

"Yes," I told him, and jumped out of the car to help my mother off the car. She was heavy, and after the awful journey, slower. Within seconds I was hit on the head and felt like I was fainting. I do not know if I awoke from the German's kicks, and despite being dizzy, I managed to help my mother get down.

Jewish prisoners with wagons came on the platform. The elderly and disabled people who could not get in line and walk were placed on the carts. They were led straight to a place from which they did not return.

We wanted to collect our belongings. Instructions were shouted: "Leave everything on the car and form two lines immediately." There was a peculiar odor in the air, one of roasting meat. The Jews who watched over us pointed to a huge chimney that emitted smoke. "You, too, will be there soon."

We lined up in rows. In front of us stood a tall, neatly dressed and elegant looking man. It later turned out that his name was Dr. Josef Mengele. He stood calmly in place, sending those in the line appearing before him with a finger gesture to the right or to the left. On one side were the old people and the little children.

On the other side were the young and healthy. I told my sister-in-law Ilka to give her children, Willie and Naomi, to my mother. That way she might be able to join us on the right side, the side of the healthy. "I have no idea what happened to Pinchas and whether he is alive or not," she said. All communication with her husband had been cut off since he was drafted into the Labor Service. "All I have in the world are my two children. Whatever happens to them, will happen to me, too." And so, heroically, she marched together with her children and my mother, to the left.

There was no time for hugs or a goodbye. The look in our eyes

said everything. Among the images that go through my mind night after night, the moment of parting from my mother on the platform in Birkenau occupies a prominent place. Thousands of people got off the train, passed in front of Dr. Mengele's hand gestures quietly, and in perfect order. The monster condemned thousands to death within minutes.

Communication between us was impossible. Each group of fifty was guarded by an SS man with a huge dog alongside. The agonizing partings pained people from within, but no one wept. Dudi, my sister-in-law Frida, my sister Henya and I were still together, but that, too, ended immediately, when they separated the men from the women.

The diatribes from the Jews who herded us on to the platform, the crowded train ride, the chimney, the selection...everything together created a clear picture. We had reached the end of the road. This was the place we had heard about but refused to believe existed. We refused to believe that we, too, would reach this place, and refused to believe that human beings would build and operate such a place.

They made us stand and wait. We did not know why. The waiting stirred up our nerves even more. It, too, was a means of breaking our spirits. Images from Sumy came to mind. I suddenly became determined to get hold of myself and survive. We whispered questions to the veteran Jews standing around us what we should do or say. Don't dare say you are a dentist, they told us. Dentists were assigned to the Sonderkommando and sent to remove gold teeth from the dead. After a short time, they were replaced and murdered, like the rest of the Sonderkommando. They knew too much about the extermination and could have disrupted order and discipline if they told what they had seen and did. A mechanic or a 'schlosser' - a locksmith - that could help, the veterans said. I had a new profession: 'schlosser'.

Daylight began to fade. We were herded into a large hall and ordered to strip. Our clothes, the last remnant from home, were taken from us. Thessaloniki Jews, razors in their hands, quickly dry-shaved us from head to toe. The Germans watched over them and prodded them to be faster. Imagine for a moment sheep, after shearing, bleating, and sensing they were doomed. We shivered from the cold and fatigue. From there, they put us into another hall, to shower. Hundreds of people crammed into the hall with German soldiers carrying whips standing by.

When the hall was full, the shower heads poured freezing water over us from the ceiling. After the hardships of the day, the water cut like knives, but whoever tried to escape the stream of water was whipped. Those who screamed "it's freezing" soon got a reply: "Hot water will come directly," Indeed, very quickly the cold water was exchanged by water that was boiling hot. We were being fast cooked, the water raised burns and boils all over our naked bodies.

At the entrance to the bathroom, we all received a small bar of soap with the letters RIF etched on it. Later, we learned that this soap was made from human fat. Jewish women and girls were killed by electric shock and their body fat was made into soap. The RIF was an acronym for 'Rein Idisches Fett' – Pure Jewish Fat.

They gave the prisoners soap made from the daughters of their People. What contempt, what humiliation. What a disgusting idea. Today, as I write my memoirs, Jews have a state and an army. Thousands of Israeli boys and girls have fallen in battle for the defense of their homeland. The lesson was clear: if you cannot defend yourself, your daughters may be made into soap.

Our initial reception foretold what was to come. As I have already written, the guiding principle in the Nazi mindset was to make the prisoner feel that he is nothing, worthless, to rob him of his humanity,

his personality. It was assumed that harsh and humiliating physical conditions would destroy any ability to resist. They had put a lot of thought into it and indeed created subhuman living conditions for the prisoners. They stole from the prisoners, harnessing the powers of their body and mind, which also served the purpose of inflicting death upon them.

In another room we were equipped with striped pajamas and clogs. Complaints about inappropriate sizes were treated with contempt. And so, in identical 'uniform', and in woeful spirits, they put us in a 'transit barracks'. Three-tiered wooden bunks filled the entire space. And we were ordered to find a place and go to sleep.

We clung to each other from the overcrowding and the cold. The lucky ones among us managed to fall asleep, but most were unable to shake off the terrible events of this abysmal day.

First Morning in Birkenau

In the same compound were also several long barracks called "Blocks." There was someone in charge of each one. Before we had arrived, this had been one of the prisoners who was called the Block-alteste, the "old timer man of the block." However, now the position was usually filled by a German or Swabian with the rank of sergeant or master sergeant. Under them, there was a subordinate from among the prisoners, called a Stubendienst, "the block custodian." He was responsible for the distribution of food in the mornings, and for making up the bunks and the work details. Above all, he was responsible for the prisoner count, because "perfect order" was so very important to the Germans. The Stubendienst usually had an assistant, the Rapport Schreiber, the "registrar of the block," or "lebler," who oversaw organizing the prisoners. Most importantly, the lebler, and often his assistants as well, were veteran prisoners who saw and heard everything. They also knew everything the Germans had not bothered to conceal from the prisoners, including their impending death.

The Kapo, who was also one of the prisoners, was responsible for supervising the forced labor. At the head of every labor unit, called Kommando, stood a Kapo. The lives of the prisoners were

significantly affected by the behavior and personalities of these prisoners responsible for them. There were some that allowed people to rest at the end of the work day, without harassing or abusing them, and there were others who did the opposite. When the Stubendienst was humane, and treated everyone in a just manner, the hardships were more tolerable. But there have always been bootlickers, and there were always those who were treated better or worse. The Germans liked to assign Jews to be responsible for the prisoners to create division and conflict.

There were also intentionally "favored" subgroups created who received special benefits. This was expressed first and foremost in the quantity and quality of their food, clothing, shoes and working conditions. These privileged prisoners often acted despicably towards their fellows. "The arbitrariness and humiliation by the guards, be it of the most vicious kinds, does not compare to the cruelty and degradation inflicted on prisoners by their fellow detainees," wrote Rudolf Höss, commander of Auschwitz, in his memoirs, before he was executed in 1947. Even he was stunned by the success of the favoritism system.

The doors opened on the first morning with the greeting: "Good morning, you stupid Magyars." This epithet was repeated every time the trains stopped at the ramp in Birkenau, expressing the contempt, loathing and rage the veterans of the camps had for the Jews of Hungary. There were two reasons for this: first, Polish Jewry had been sent to concentration camps since 1941 and Hungarian Jewry did nothing to stop the extermination of Polish Jews. Neither American Jewry nor the Jewish community in Palestine did anything either, although thousands enlisted in the British Army and fought with the Allies in the Western Desert, Italy, and other arenas. The anger of the Polish Jews was understandable, although it is hard to believe that the

Jews of Hungary, the Jewish settlers in Palestine or even American Jewry could have stopped the extermination apparatus.

Secondly, the inmates in the camps were convinced that the Jews of Hungary had three years to evade the clutches of the Nazis. They had not heard of the Labor Service battalions and did not know that in most cases the men were separated from their families and forcibly conscripted into the army for several years. Escape was difficult and almost impossible. A small number of individuals managed to escape through Asian Russia and were saved. But the Jews of Poland thought that the Jews in Hungary had things easy while Polish Jews were being slaughtered.

We were forbidden to get off our bunks until the Stubendienst called us to come and receive our daily portion of food - two slices of bread with a piece of marmalade on top. One by one we went to get our dish, and people were resentful: "Why such small slices?" Very soon they understood there was no point in complaining. Our lives depended on food, and the Stubendiensts could dole it however they wished.

The voices of resentment grew louder. Despite everything, some still did not understand where we were. People were not satisfied with the food they had been given and there was a commotion. From my place on the bunk, I called out to the Stubendienst: "What do you care? Give him the slices he wants." Unfortunately, just at that moment the door opened. An SS officer a flawlessly ironed uniform stepped inside, inquisitive as to what was happening. He was clean-shaven, tall, thin, and wearing riding pants and polished boots. His eyes conveyed pure evil. In SS officers training, they were taught to make a powerful first impression to terrorize prisoners, so they would fear them from then on.

He was not German, but was either Lithuanian, Ukrainian,

Bosnian or Croatian. I could not discern which. These nationalities helped the Nazis exterminate the Jews out of racist beliefs. In many cases they were even more cruel and sadistic than the Germans. These men, whose command of German was not fluent, would use clubs instead of words to make themselves understood.

The Stubendienst cringed. "What is happening here?" The officer demanded. The Stubendienst explained the circumstances behind the commotion. At the Nazi's command, he pointed to the complainant and to me as responsible for the uproar. We were ordered to come and stand before the officer.

He surveyed us from head to toe and ordered me to put my head in the large furnace used to heat the block in the winter, and to hold it with both hands on either side. Then, with my backside turned towards him and my head in the stinking oven, he began to beat me. I counted four painful blows, then my senses blurred. I am sure there were more, but I bit my lip and did not emit a sound. He stopped hitting me, ordered me to move away and for the other prisoner to take the same position.

The other man started whimpering and whining even before the first blow landed. That made the officer hit him more and more out of ridicule and sadistic pleasure. When he had rained the 25 blows on him that we were sentenced to, the man defecated, fell over and passed out. His friends rushed to him and cleaned him up. He was lucky to have such friends. Thus began the first morning in the transit block at Birkenau.

Two Slices a Day

With the understanding that two slices were our daily ration, an existential question arose: What to do with them. Finish the whole day's food right away? Or hide half for the end of the day? If so, where to hide it? Everywhere inside the block was exposed to thievery. Any hungry person could become a thief.

Some of the prisoners ate everything immediately, because hunger gnawed at them and no one knew what would happen in a moment, in an hour or by the evening. Others would crumble the bread, sprinkle the crumbs in their pocket and eat them during the day. Others tied the bread in a bag around their necks and carried it with them. I soon learned that when a person is starving, his thoughts revolve solely around food. He cannot think of anything else.

We went outside to a parade ground for a lineup during which we were told about keeping order in the camp. "Ordnung" in a Nazi concentration camp meant one thing: total obedience.

About two hundred girls and women, between the ages of 17 to 35, marched not far from us to an unknown destination. We recognized some of them from the ghetto and the train. They wore striped sacks as dresses, and wooden clogs that clattered with each step. Their heads were shaved and their eyes bleary from exhaustion. There was

terror in their faces.

As if on command, we men began weeping. We tried to turn our heads away to take our eyes off these women, but we could not. Our eyes were glued to all the marchers. It was a parade of the doomed as if borrowed from Dante's inferno. Against the backdrop of this heart-wrenching visual and emotional torture, was the smoldering chimney.

The words of Jews on the platform echoed in my ears: "Your mother and sister are going up in smoke, and soon you will join them." I felt like I was choking.

This was an account of the first day in the camp, but it certainly was not the first day they had endeavored to strip us of our humanity. Some people lost their will to go on and ran towards the electrified fence. It all happened so quickly that the Germans did not have time to aim the rifles. Within seconds there were several charred bodies on the fence. In this setting, we presented ourselves in a lineup. One of many more to come.

Each lineup lasted hours. Every moment in Birkenau seemed like our last. We did not know how long we would be there, or where they were going to send us. The purpose of the arrangement, like everything else they did, was to treat us as a herd of sheep to wear us down. They made certain we were kept busy all the time. And everything was handled through threats, beatings, and intimidation. The nights were no refuge either. Events of the day haunted us. Our stomachs cried out for sustenance.

We took advantage of any occasional respite for conversations with camp veterans. They told us everything in minute detail. Their fate and ours, they said, would ultimately be the same. They vented their feelings through the stories and intimated to us that we must do everything we could to toughen ourselves for possible escape. A

key phrase they repeated was: "Do not believe a word the Germans say. Their promises are worth nothing. Your end and your families' will be the same as all who came before you. You will finish there, in the chimney."

Were They All Gone?

The extermination process was orderly and guarded, adorned in various and sundry deceptions such as a shower, cleaning up, having an opportunity to work. People were brought into a room and ordered to take off their clothes and hang them neatly on hooks on the walls. The Germans told them with chilling cynicism to remember where they hung their clothes, as if they would need them again after the shower to go on with their lives as usual.

Stripped naked, the people were directed into the shower hall. There, it was already clear that things were not so innocent and simple. They were packed in with appalling density, but even those who suspected and understood what was going to happen could do nothing. Shower pipes came out of the ceiling, and in the space over the heads of the adults, the Germans heaved in the small children.

Then the doors were shut.

SS men dumped in Zyklon B gas pellets through vents in the roof or holes in the side of the chamber. Within a quarter-of-an-hour, hundreds of men, women, and children died of poisoning and suffocation. Johann Kremer, the SS doctor who served as a physician at Auschwitz and monitored the gassing of prisoners, testified at the trials after the war that the "shouting and screaming of the victims

could be heard through the openings and it was clear that they fought for their lives."

Even that was carefully thought out. The Germans streamed the gas out sparingly. The desperation of the miserable unfortunates in the closed hall grew more frantic; they spilled their guts out, vomiting and retching. When the doors were opened twenty minutes later the Jews whose job it was as Sonderkommandos began to evacuate the bodies for sorting. They shaved off all the hair of the corpses and pried open mouths to remove gold crowns from the teeth with special clamps. There was also a sorting by types of skin. There was an "artist" in the nearby Auschwitz camp who fashioned lampshades out of human skin to light up the rooms of the Nazi murderers who took great pride in them.

The corpses were thrown - by Jewish prisoners, of course - into huge ovens and burnt to ashes. The Sonderkommando also searched for any bits of gold remaining in the piles of ashes, which would be used to fund the German war effort.

The well-known precious German metals and chemical company, Degussa, smelted this gold into ingots and stamped them with fictitious dates so that the gold could be sold outside of Germany. This company was also the main producer of Zyklon B gas. Degussa's directors knew that the gas was to be used for the extermination of the Jews. After the war, the management was sentenced to prison and released after serving less than three years.

The burden on the gas chambers and crematoria called for the development of additional means of mass slaughter. A huge pit was dug at the edge of the camp, and fire burned at the bottom day and night. Frail adults or small children were clubbed over the head, thrown onto a wagon, and then heaved into the fire. The stench of burning human flesh always filled the air.

This task was also carried out by the Jews, whose fate was sealed, as they were assigned to the Sonderkommando. I later learned that on October 6, 1944, after the extermination of the Jews of Hungary, a Sonderkommando uprising broke out at Birkenau. The rebels used explosives that had been smuggled into Birkenau by women prisoners. Hundreds of workers worked day and night at the "Union" explosives factory situated at Auschwitz. The rebels believed and expected that masses of prisoners would join in the uprising, but that did not happen. They managed to throw some SS men into the crematoria and barricaded themselves in the number 3 crematorium, but within a few hours, the Nazis succeeded in breaking in and killing everyone except the doctors among them.

In the little time available to me, I did not know who to think about or what to think about. I did not even know how to think anymore. Events from my life rolled around in my brain. Was it all for nothing? Were the successful survival strategies I had learned in the last five years to have no value? What about my family, who were so dear to me? What had happened to my mother, my sisters, my sisters-in-law, my tender nephews and nieces? Were they all gone? And what about my people? Are we all to be wiped off the face of the earth? What of the religious promises about the Messiah's coming? They educated us to believe in the coming of the Messiah, and he was only moving farther away. Was there any point in trying to rebel? Maybe all is lost. I understood those who had took their lives in their own hands and committed suicide by throwing themselves on the electrified fence. Yet, within me there was still a glimmer of hope that kept me from doing something that extreme.

When the order came to leave Birkenau, I was overjoyed. We were saved! The impossible discipline, the gas chambers, and the fiery pit – all of it would be behind us. Then I remembered what the veterans

told us: "Live the moment, there is no way to know what tomorrow would bring." And at this particular moment, things were looking better.

What followed was not encouraging news. We learned that our next destination was Auschwitz. We knew this was the place where the most terrible extermination of Jews was taking place. The bubble of joy burst abruptly.

A Hell Called Auschwitz

A three-kilometer march brought us to the Auschwitz Gate. Our ashen faces were greeted by the infamous arched inscription "Arbeit Macht Frei" or "Work makes you free."

From their position of power, the Germans enjoyed mocking the Jews. Nazism, as well as a large part of the Christian world presented Jews as idle, lazy blood suckers. According to this distorted view, they were offering the Jews a last-minute reprieve, a real end-of-season deal. Jew, save yourself. If you work, you will be free. The cynical, nauseating sign left out the part that no matter what you do in Auschwitz, this is your last stop. In the end, we will poison and suffocate you to death in a gas chamber if we do not kill you first, by another means.

An orchestra greeted us on our arrival. The music they played, as if by invitation, was by Hungarian composers such as Franz Liszt. Included in the repertoire was of course, the "Rákóczi March," a Hungarian patriotic anthem. This game of deception instilled in some people a spark of hope. There will always be weak people who will grasp at straws. This time, too, there were those who believed that they had come to a Labor Camp and not an extermination camp. "It must be, we were greeted with Hungarian music." This did not work

for me. On the contrary, every such "comforting" step increased my suspicion. I realized clearly that we had reached the last stop for the Jews.

Beyond the gate, a man-made hell awaited us. The Germans concentrated all their tremendous capabilities to wipe off the earth an entire people, who had been in existence from ancient times - my people. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, they located the main assembly line of the extermination process with German efficiency and output capabilities. Everything went like clockwork, hup, hup, hup. The precision oiled German machine worked perfectly. First, the Jews are rounded up and crammed into ghettos, then they were robbed, put on trains, suffocated with Zyklon B gas, their bodies burned, and their ashes scattered. And there is also a rationale for this: "What do we need Jews for? Two thousand years ago they crucified Jesus, they steal our property and suck our money out of us." That's what they are taught at home. This is what they are taught in school, and that is what they are taught in church. They must be eliminated.

Now it was my turn to enter this hell. Contrary to the well-known proverb, the road leading to hell is also full of evil intentions.

But there is a way around the assembly line. Why kill someone who can contribute to the war effort? We will separate those who can work for us and work hard until he reaches the limits of his strength, and when he becomes ill or exhausted we will put him back on the assembly line conveyor belt leading straight to Zyklon B.

I realized that the move from Birkenau, the extermination camp, to Auschwitz, the labor camp, was an opportunity to be seized. If you work, you do not die. I suddenly internalized the belief that I would be able to get off the assembly line before the final stop; to be different and stronger than the great number of others being murdered there. I had learned from my own hard-fought experiences that even

a seemingly hopeless situation can reverse itself in a second. Even when balancing on the edge, a ladder may suddenly appear to keep you from falling. I had learned from the times when I had come up short because of lack of determination and belief in myself.

Nandor

Inside the gate, an extraordinary surprise awaited Dudi and me. Our oldest brother Noah, Nandor, welcomed us. Someone familiar was waiting for me! Was this real or was I dreaming? He followed our entry into the camp, recognized us, and waited for us. We were overjoyed. Nandor, my brother who had gone missing, had found us - and we had found him.

He was only about 35 but his hair was white. He had been in Auschwitz since the beginning of 1942 and had miraculously managed to survive. With his talents and outstanding interpersonal skills, he was able to obtain positions inside the camp hospital. The kind-hearted Nandor helped those around him, and they rewarded him in ways that helped him to survive.

His appearance and dress were different from the other prisoners. He had a pedantic personality and his appearance indicated that he played an important role. His striped pajama uniform was tailored to his measurements. His shoes were polished. His hair was trimmed every night, and his baldness shone through. A person with graying hair could easily have been sent for extermination. Our joy was short-lived. "Couldn't you find in the house a rope thick enough to hang yourselves?" Nandor asked. "Why did you come here? To

experience suffering every minute of every day until you die?"

We were stunned. And then the following blow: "Your mother went up in smoke to the heavens last night." He continued, rattling off the names of the sisters, the in-law, and their little children who were no longer among the living. The joy of the meeting suddenly became awash with anguish. In normal times, we would have embraced one another and wept bitter tears. But weeping and sentimentality did not suit a Nazi concentration camp. We summoned the strength to avoid mention of Mother's death and talked to him about ways to survive in Auschwitz. The fact was, after all, he had survived this hell for almost three years.

We knew that we had very little time to meet, and we had to be focused. Nothing could bring Mother back, and no one could ever forget her. Memory of her came back to each of us in the terrible, torturous nights to follow.

Nandor recited to us the 'Laws of Survival'. "Take care of your cleanliness and clothing. Equip yourself with rags and wipe your nose so that it does not run. The German is just looking for an excuse to beat you or kill you. Keep that in mind and make sure you stop your nose from running immediately. The tension, the hunger, the cold and the labor will wear away your body's resistance."

He explained to us the concept of the "Aktion." When there is a pause between the trains, and the gas showers are idle, the Germans go mad. Their rules of efficiency do not mention pauses. Therefore, when the line to the gas chambers is short, they gather up people inside the camp. This is done violently, of course. The unlucky ones are marched directly to the gas chambers, and anyone arguing or trying to escape is immediately shot.

The "Selection" accompanies the Aktion. Besides the initial selection by Mengele, there was always a danger in the air of more;

random selections that can take place at any hour and in any corner of the camp. Those who look weak and sick are sent to their deaths. The healthy ones will be allowed to continue to support the German war machine. They kill two birds with one stone. Jews are exploited to the point where they are not equal in strength and capacity, and that's when the decisions of the "Wannsee Conference" are implemented. "Make every effort to look healthy, stand up straight and look strong," Nandor said.

His advice would have sounded strange in normal times. In the hell of the concentration camp it would be quite easy to lose interest in looking neat and clean. The thought often went through my mind: "What does it matter?" Yet such a thought could mean the difference between life and death.

Nandor added: "Try to have a number tattooed on your forearm as soon as possible. The number is a recognizable mark. It is much easier to destroy someone who has no number. For the Germans, with their obsession for order, the liquidation of someone with a number statistically alters the camp population. And that requires filling out various forms reporting the death, and that is an annoying task."

The lesson went on: "Give and take is the basic principle in the camp. Here, "Organisieren" – to organize – is essential. To be an organizer means to make careful, calculated choices always. If you do not do that, things will go harder for you and death will be that much closer. For example, in the selections, always be next to someone who looks worse than you do." Nandor instructed us to lower our profile; not to stand out in any way and anywhere. "Be simpler and less smart, and your chances for survival will be better," he said.

A good "organizer" must be skilled in barter. For example, get good, thick shoelaces, because bored Nazis just wait for someone

to bend down to tighten or, God forbid, to tie his shoelaces. They release the wolf dogs or the Dobermans, who are trained to attack, and even if you are not physically hurt, the fright is enough to make you collapse.

With the help of a network of connections that go from hand to hand, precious items can reach those who need them. Strips of rubber, and cloth ribbons for trousers, rags to put in shoes have great value here, Nandor explained, but the most coveted currency of all is bread.

It was not the bread we were familiar with. The Germans cut back on the flour and put 60% sawdust into the dough. In their view, that was good enough for the Jews. An "organizer" will know how to get a thicker slice of the "bread" and less murky "soup." Such soup contained a handful of beans, which can give you two hours of relief from relentless hunger.

Judging by the clothes, the shoes, the general appearance, and the behavior, you could tell from a distance who gets along better and who does not. Even a solution for some of the illnesses was thanks to "Organisieren." Medicines could be obtained in Auschwitz, and the most sought after and expensive of them all was Ultraseptil. It was the antibiotic of those days and had a major role in my own recovery as I have previously mentioned.

The gist of Nandor's advice was this: if you maintain a neat and healthy appearance, there is a chance that your extermination will be delayed. If you look messy and ill, you may be caught in the net of the next Aktion.

A-4650

After three days here we were called to get a number. We were branded like beasts, with blue ink on the left arm. I received number A-4650, and Dudi, who was standing in line behind me, became A-4651 on the list. It was our temporary, tenuous life insurance policy. Our names no longer mattered to the "method." To alleviate our feeling of humiliation, Nandor told us that the Germans also branded the SS men with a tattoo under their armpits. That was true to an extent, but they only inscribed the blood type of that soldier, in case he needed a transfusion, so this information did not dispel the sense of shame for having an ID number seared into our skin. Then again, the tattoo helped identify SS soldiers at the end of the war and settle accounts with them.

I Am Here For Now

Now that we had numbers, we were waiting to be sent to work, when Nandor arrived with frightening last-minute information. He learned that people in relatively good physical condition like us were being sent to work in the mines.

Working in the mines was as good as a death sentence. It was mind-numbing physical work in coal mines or stone quarries, covering you with either black or white grime. The dust got into the lungs very quickly, breathing became difficult, but the physical demands remained as severe as ever, and the workers simply collapsed. No one lasted longer than three weeks. Nandor had a plan: he would have us admitted to the hospital where he worked, and we might be able to avoid the initial selection for work in the mines.

Indeed, Nandor, the ultimate "Organizer" spoke with the doctor in charge, Dr. Wollman. He hospitalized us as having the flu, even though it was a dangerous ploy. When the trains of Jews who would be sent to the gas chambers were delayed, the hospital was the immediate source for filling the quotas. It was impossible to know when the next Aktion would take place. Nandor told us repeatedly that it was a dangerous gamble, both for us and for him. He asked us dozens of times not to come to him with complaints if we were caught. But

at least he saved us from the first consignment to the mines.

The hospital was run like a normal clinic. It was here that the Germans brought Red Cross personnel for visits. It was to show, ostensibly, that Auschwitz was a work camp and not an extermination camp. The Red Cross people went along with the ruse. The smoke constantly rising from the chimney was inconsequential for them. The burnt smell was the smell of laundry to them. Another lie in the chain of lies in every war, and of that war in particular.

With all the tension we felt because of the ploy, we enjoyed a kind of convalescence in the heart of the inferno. But Nandor constantly repeated to us: "I am here for now, but I don't know what will happen even in the next five minutes. Do not believe what any German says. Always suspect the opposite, and always be on guard."

In bed next to me lay a captured Ukrainian soldier. I spoke to him in Russian about all the places I had been in serving in the Labor Service. He couldn't believe that I went through all that and survived. Only my knowledge of places that were in his own residential district convinced him that I was telling the truth. When Dr. Wollman, who was a Lithuanian Jew, made his daily rounds, the Ukrainian told him my story. Wollman was astonished. "You, who have been through so much, how have you ended up in Auschwitz?" He half-inquired, half-exclaimed. "Didn't you realize where you were coming to? Couldn't you have taken advantage of your resourcefulness and escape in time?"

What could I say? I was furious at myself over the weakness of mind that had come over me when Dudi and I surrendered. There was absolutely no chance that I could save my mother or other family members. I did not have to give up. It was a terrible failure that could have cost me my life. Such behavior did not suit me.

We hid out for several days in the hospital, waiting to be sent

to forced labor. We hoped that Nandor might be able to arrange a reasonable work assignment for us. All around us, events took place that would have caused a sane person to go mad. Dudi and I had a guiding guardian angel in the worst hell hole in the world. In a short time, we understood a little about the intricacies of the hell we were in and the way things were done there. Nandor revealed to us what was being carried out in secret - what was happening in places behind the walls and fences designed to conceal even more inhuman and unbelievable acts perpetrated by the cruel and barbaric German racists. These were places where medical and psychological experiments were conducted on human beings. Dr. Mengele played a major role in these crimes as well.

Nandor's Tumultuous Conversations

One day Prince Pauli, a longtime acquaintance, came to me. This was the same Prince Pauli whom I had helped join the Labor Force battalion. It is reasonable to assume that my help probably saved his life. We embraced each other. Pauli again pleaded for my help, this time for his father.

He said that his father, despite his advanced age of 70, had managed to outsmart Mengele. The clever man had put on sporty looking clothes before getting off the train, Mengele thought him younger than he actually was, and gestured for him to go to the right.

To think up and carry out such a thing, one had to be an unusual person. The grueling ride in the cattle car, with the dead, the filth, the stench, and the crush of people was a nightmare. But Prince Pauli's father was able to stay focused and carry out his plan to look younger than his age. In normal times, an older person could easily dress up younger, and a young person could dress as a more mature adult. Under the present conditions it was an impressive maneuver. No wonder he was a successful industrialist before the war.

Prince had heard about Nandor and hoped he could use his connections to get his father relatively easier work. His concern was touching. As exhausted as he was, he managed to find me amongst all

the barracks of Auschwitz. It was hard enough for Nandor to try and help us, but still I decided to talk to him about Prince Pauli's father.

It was not easy. When Nandor was with me and we could find a quiet corner, he took time to take a nap. At first it seemed strange that my brother was not paying any attention to me. It took me a while, and in the end I realized. He was in constant turmoil. Whenever he closed his eyes, there erupted within him like molten lava, nightmares of the terrible things he had seen in Auschwitz. In his dreams he would see his dead wife and daughters, who would repeat repeatedly that they had been made into soap. And he vowed to avenge them.

Nandor needed these "conversations." In my company he felt safe to sleep...and talk. When I watched him sleeping, I was overwhelmed by nostalgia for better days, days we spent together in the presence of a warm, loving family.

Eventually I was able to talk to Nandor about Prince's father. He promised to try to help. A few days later he asked for Mr. Prince's tattoo number. Miraculously, he had the old man placed the very next day in the "Potato Commandos." This had a double advantage. First, there was no need to leave the camp for work. Second, the proximity to the kitchen improved his chances for nutrition. In any case, my friend Pauli's dad got a reprieve - peel potatoes for soup, and survive, at least for the moment.

Types of Flames

After he managed to get us to the hospital, Nandor's efforts to put us in a less lethal "kommando" also succeeded; we were sent to work in the large truck garage "Praga Hella," which was seven kilometers from Auschwitz.

When they burned the number on my arm, I was asked my profession. I answered "Schlosser," of course. Dudi did the same and that listing had helped us now.

After the morning lineup, we were organized in rows of five and walked out of the gates of the camp in the direction of the garage. We marched through the fields. Two SS soldiers with dogs accompanied us. Occasionally we succeeded in gathering roots from the fields to chew on and quench our hunger, although such a spontaneous movement was dangerous. If you bent down to grab a root and the German guard saw it, he would release the dog. The dog would try to bite your backside. Sometimes it succeeded and sometimes a Jewish prayer would help. I will never be able to understand the mechanism that managed to plant so much malice in the Germans.

During the march we passed by the fence at Birkenau. On the way there and on the way back.

The huge chimney and the smoke billowing from it could not be

ignored. Sometimes a strong flame would come from the chimney. It was a hard thing to see. We knew it was the chimney of a factory that burnt people at a maddening pace, a constant reminder of what had happened to our loved ones and what awaited us.

The veteran prisoners among us knew how to determine what bodies were being burnt by the type of the smoke and the flame. Incinerating young children produced a strong flame, whereas the old and the sick were all skin and bones, and there was only smoke – no flame.

To this day I am haunted by the reaction of a Polish Jew, who was reputed to be a Torah scholar. The man would shut his eyes and with clenched fists howl up at the heavens: "Are you blind? Do you not see what is happening here? Where are you?" He repeated this over and over again. Did he lose faith in God in the end? I will never know.

I Will Kill You Here and Now

Auschwitz was surrounded by several industrial plants that served the German war effort. Tens of thousands of prisoners worked in them. In addition, the Germans sought to appropriate huge quantities of items taken from the Jews upon their arrival at the camp - clothing, shoes, furs, and valuables. The long, beautiful tresses of women's hair were also shaved off and taken. I have already spoken about the gold-capped teeth. Everyone would take something of value with them when fleeing that might save them: a diamond taken off a ring, a jewel that could be hidden. Maybe this object would save them or their family?

As I have already said, the luggage and bags of all those who arrived in Birkenau were left on the train. They were brought to huge storage halls, where thousands of prisoners unloaded them and sorted the contents. They were tied into bundles of men's and women's clothing by type and size, including the shoes and other items.

Due to the enormous monetary value of these possessions, the area where it was stored was called the "Canada Wing," Canada being a country that was perceived as rich by the prisoners. The possessions of each individual Jew brought here for extermination was not singularly substantial, but when you multiply their worth by

the millions of people who were exterminated in the concentration camps, it added up to a tremendous amount. The Nazi regime took it all in the spirit of "Hast thou murdered and also taken possession?"

The plundered property was sent to Germany, with a large scheme for transport being required to support the looting system and the factories in the area. The garage we were sent to was an important link in the transport chain. It serviced many hundreds of trucks with about two hundred workers from different nationalities. Many were Poles. The red triangle they wore, like our yellow Star of David, signified that they were political prisoners.

By 1944, there was already severe fuel rationing in the German army. Genuine fuel was supplied only to the front lines. In the rear, vehicles were converted to run on steam. The firewood they burned to drive the trucks left a large deposit of soot in the engines. A major part of our work in the garage was cleaning the engine parts.

Dudi and I were placed in the lubrication department. The head of the department was Polish, and the entire garage was run by a Polish kapo of German descent - Kapo Paul, a huge, hulking man. He had been in jail for eight years after being convicted of murdering his wife and two children. The Germans thought that criminals of his kind would be effective in managing forced labor workers, and instead of spending his days rotting in prison, they put him in charge of Jewish workers. Whenever he was not satisfied with our work he would say: "I'm a killer. If I could kill my wife and children, I would have no problem killing 150 of you." His words sounded convincing. The German "strategy" worked well.

Working alongside Polish prisoners was not easy either. Every action or word of theirs reeked of anti-Semitism. Supposedly, they were prisoners like us. However, there was a difference - they were confident that they would not be led to the crematoria. The

certainty that we Jews would soon die, caused them to abuse us and look down on us. The Poles and the Germans were deadly enemies. There was between them and still is, centuries of mutual hatred. The extermination of Jews united them, so most of them had no trouble cooperating.

The garage had a large bathroom that could accommodate thirty people at a time.

It was also a place of refuge, where one could rest a little and exchange information. People would go into the bathroom, take down their pants as if they had to defecate, and instead, rest and talk. A lookout stood at the entrance to warn of an overseer approaching. But the Poles did not allow Jews to enjoy rest in the toilets. For us, they were always occupied, even when really needed.

Another example was the behavior of a burly Polish overseer named Mitek, who enjoyed abusing any Jew he could get his hands on. He especially liked to wield a rag soaked in black liquid, a mixture of machine oil and grease, and he would smear his victim's face and head. The grease burned the eyes, the stains on the clothes were hard to get out and walking around Auschwitz in dirty clothing was life-threatening. But worst of all were the insults and humiliation.

I once fell into his clutches while I was holding a hammer and a pipe wrench in one hand. He grabbed me and tried to smear my face. I held on to him, grabbed him by the collar with my free hand, pinned him to the wall, and began to choke him, threatening him with the hammer in my other hand. He turned blue and started to choke. His Polish friends stood by and watched, frozen to the spot. I said to him: "I'm not like the others, Mitek. I'll kill you here and now. I'm not afraid of anything. My family already went up the chimney. You have something to go back to, something to lose. So be careful!"

His Polish comrades looked at each other and dispersed. They,

too, tried to keep alive and avoided creating trouble. From that day, the despicable Mitek always said hello and immediately moved away from me.

The work in the garage required an understanding of engine structure, and trucks in general. Many the workers lacked technical skills, and this resulted in many work accidents. Worst of all was a truck falling off a lift. This would happen mostly when the rear springs or a wheel was being replaced on a truck. The reason was always the incompetence of the workers, but the Germans interpreted it as sabotage, and exploded with rage, punishing everyone nearby. You had to keep an eye out and stay away from unprofessional workers.

Luckily, Dudi and I had good technical abilities, and we were easily integrated into skilled crews. Besides, inside the trucks that were brought in for lubrication, we often found objects that could be traded, and sometimes even some edible food and that was another advantage of working in the garage.

The work was physically difficult. Beyond that, in Auschwitz it was imperative to be attentive at every moment to what was happening around you. The tension during the day was tremendous, and the nights were even harder. At night, when you are alone with yourself, your thoughts, worries, and fears float to the surface. I wondered again and again how it came about that we three brothers had somehow been thrown together into the heart of darkness.

Where Are You, Father?

I thought about the strength it gave to each of the three of us. We were brothers. There were many similarities among us but also sharp differences. The main common denominator was excellent interpersonal skills, the know-how to communicate with people. We knew how to approach people eye-to-eye. This trait gave us an advantage in coping with the insane situations that war brings to everyone. On the other hand we were different in appearance. Dudi and I were tall and manly looking, while Nandor was not as impressive. That did not alter the fact that he was the most gifted of us all.

During the nights, I realized that I had acquired my approach to people from my Mother's example. For her, as a religious woman, all human beings were equal. That is what she taught us. Belief in God guided her to love of Man. The thought of my mother suffocating in agony in the gas chambers and rising in smoke to the heavens seared my soul every night.

Again and again I thought about Nandor. How he had appeared, like an angel, at the right time and place to rescue Dudi and me. I watched him miraculously maneuvering in this impossible place, despite his being a prisoner. I admired the connections he made with so many people. Imagine: a Jew convinces the cruel manpower

supervisors where to assign his brothers to work. Nandor's relationships with the hospital's chief physician and others in similar positions were lifesaving.

I ached at night for his suffering. I imagined his wife Leah and lovely daughters visiting my mother, their grandmother Rebecca. When they came to visit our house in the village, they filled us with joy and laughter. Grandma Rebecca spoiled them with love and warmth. That was her way.

Would Nandor be able to start a new family? Was there a replacement for the good that was his? Is there a cure for bitter memories? What will happen to Nandor when this nightmare is over?

I thought about my father, Ben-Zion Isaiah. He had safely made it to New York a few years before the war. Why wasn't he here to take care of us? Your three sons are struggling. And if he were here, which side would Mengele send him to? Dad was a sturdy man, over six feet tall. That would be to the right side. But he wore a long, thick beard like pious Jews that Germans detested. Maybe his beard had started turning white and that meant with certainty he would be sent to the left side.

We were told that Dad had gone to America to improve our economic situation. Maybe we were not told the truth. Is it possible that Dad left because he understood that it was too dangerous for Jews to live in Europe? There were those who were wise enough to flee to Palestine or America when Hitler came to power. Maybe he wanted to set up a safe haven where he could bring the whole family.

It's good he got out in time, a smart man. The more the troubles of the Jews increased, and it was clear that the Germans were bent on annihilating us, the more the world denied us refuge. Switzerland, Canada, the United States closed their borders to the Jews. The British blocked the entry into Palestine, precisely when Jews had

nowhere to lay their heads and the Nazis sent millions to the gas chambers.

Well done Dad, you got out in time. How do you feel now, so far from everyone? Do you know what is happening to your family? To your people?

Dad did not send his first wages in America to the family. The money was designated for the construction of a new synagogue in Lisichivo. My parents' religious beliefs mandated that first they care for others and the community in which they lived. Does father see that our house and our synagogue are longer ours? He certainly could not have imagined that his wife, daughters, and grandchildren had been brutally murdered. Who could conceive of such horror?

I look around me. Where am I? I am trying to fall asleep in a place that resembles a chicken coop. Where has my life taken me? The block has three levels of wooden bunks. Hundreds of people are trying to sleep, crammed together, touching each other, each in their own private hell. Everyone has loved ones who have already perished. Everyone has their own story; some have many stories. People weep quietly. They sigh. Everyone has pain and hurt, and they all know that they have been issued a one-way ticket to oblivion.

I tried to focus on my experiences. I could no longer sleep. I thought of the good people who helped me along the way. The darkness was illuminated by the image of the Ukrainian woman whose husband found me in the ditch. I had collapsed into it sick with typhus. The farmer called his wife and together they rescued me and took care of me. She cared for me as if I were family. They both risked their lives and took care of a Jew. There are also good Christians.

I remembered the woman who directed me and Dr. Marton to go under the trains at Sumy. I was at her home the night before. She and her friend tried for hours to keep me from going to Sumy, but

I did not listen. Despite that, she was there for me where she could help. Who was this woman? Why did she do what she did? Was she a Jew hiding her identity or a decent human being of another religion? What does it matter? She was remarkable in her courage. Her image, dressed in black, guiding us to our path of escape with gentle hand gestures, came to me in the nights. Bless you, mysterious woman!

I remembered my sister Henya, who was chosen together with us to go to the right. Since the women were separated from the men we did not know what happened to her. Henya was small and slender. Since birth she had suffered from various illnesses and was delicate. How would she survive? Where did she end up? Does she have friends with her? Do they help her? Our Henya needs help. Who will save her?

Leah's Refusal

People in the camp remembered who was sent to the right and who to the left. They told each other. A kind of human archive who remembered events and passed them on to whomever they could. The purpose was to provide information to people whose loved ones had disappeared. It was a defense against the Germans' wish to conceal the facts and annihilate 'numbers' rather than names.

The intricately networked Nandor brought us two pieces of terrible news from eyewitnesses: our sister Leah, 17, was a girl of exceptional beauty. She had attended a religious boarding school and was taken to the ghetto and to Auschwitz along with her friends. Her beauty was her undoing, and she was 'chosen' to serve the German soldiers with her body. When she refused, she was beaten to intimidate the other girls selected along with her, and when the beatings did not convince her either, she was thrown at a group of Doberman dogs. The Germans trained the Dobermans to attack. Leah was their target that day. She died a horrible death seized with terror, her body torn, mangled, and ripped apart.

I felt profoundly helpless. How was I not able to protect my sister? Such a torturous death was so detestable, so demanding of revenge. But how could I avenge her? Who were the bastards who did this?

Will we ever find these human beasts? Will we be able to settle accounts with them?

We could not talk about what happened to Leah. We refused to believe our ears. We were tormented from within. It was impossible to verbalize what suffering she had endured. Our feelings were of rage and paralysis. The thought of our gentle sister, believing in God with such deep and wholesome faith, pierced my heart and brought me to tears.

The second piece of bad news concerned David, my brother Sigmund's eldest son. Sigmund was older than the rest us. When the war broke out he already had a dental clinic in Pressburg. He also amassed enough money so that when things began looking dark he was able to flee with his wife Rosa and their two children, David and Noah. However, David, who was 12, asked his parents to let him stay with his grandfather, Haim Meir Gutman. He was extremely attached to his Grandpa and did not want to leave him.

When grandfather and grandson came before Mengele, he sent David to the right and his grandfather to the left. The grandfather gathered his courage and turned directly to the monster. He probably did not grasp the meaning of right and left. He said that his grandson was his responsibility and said, "Let him stay with me." The Auschwitz angel of death "kindly" smiled and confirmed to Grandpa with a 'no problem' hand gesture to take David with him. How much cynical cruelty and evil in one creature!

Often I thought about my brother Dudi. He also had good social skills and an appealing smile, which opened doors and hearts. He knew how to be attentive to others, and radiated warmth and empathy. These qualities won him many friends. But Dudi had it the hardest of the three of us. Nandor survived thanks to his brilliant mind. I survived thanks to my strength and resourcefulness. Dudi

was the youngest and the most pampered of the three of us. For now, we had all been lucky, but I worried about him at night, afraid he would break from the strain.

Dudi was the kind of person who would describe in great detail how he managed to catch a large trout of several kilos. At home, we all had to listen to him for hours describing his struggle to land the fish. By this time of course, the fish was already in the frying pan. This was what life was all about for Dudi. Working hours in a garage did not suit him. What did this pleasure seeker learn from war? How do we get him through this inferno?

Sleepless nights without rest, and tomorrow I must work in the garage and avoid trouble and complications and watch out for Dudi. I need to find Nandor. I must keep in touch with him...millions of thoughts and no answers.

Surprise: A Friend in the SS

I was standing alone in one of the garage hangars when a truck drove in. The driver, an SS sergeant, jumped out of the cab right in front of me. We stood facing each other and did not know what to do. I almost hugged him but caught myself. It would not be appropriate for an SS soldier. Hugging a Jew could be costly for both of us.

But the driver in the black uniform was my friend, Fritzi.

Stunned, Fritzi looked left and right, checking that no one was around and shouted, "You fool! This is where you ended up? Come, I'll show you where your God is, the one you wanted to pray to three times a day!"

He grabbed my arm tightly and led me a few steps to the window. We watched in silence as the flames spewed out of the chimney.

It was Fritzi, the son of a fishmonger from Pressburg. His mother had a stall at the end of Jew Street. We met when I came to buy fish from her for the Sabbath. Later I joined him a few times for a game of rag ball, and we became friends. It had been seven or eight years since I last saw him. And now, a surprise: here was Fritzi standing before me in an SS uniform with the rank of sergeant.

He went on to say: "I pity you, my dear friend. You, too, will end up in the chimney. But I swear to you, as my name is Fritzi, I will

help you."

He arranged a hiding place where he would conceal slices of bread for me. But he was not satisfied with slices of bread. When his truck came in to be washed or for lubrication, he would bring me a big sandwich stuffed with nutritious fillings.

It was less pleasant to hear that he was transporting loot stolen from Jews in Auschwitz and Birkenau and taking it to large warehouses in Germany.

The Slovak Fritzi took a huge risk in helping me. I thanked him and I am grateful to this day. He helped me as much as he could up until the day the extermination camp was evacuated. And the greatest help of all came on the eve of the "Death March," which I will tell about later. Despite what I wrote about the Slovaks as a people, there were a few who were not racists and who acted with compassion. Fritzi, the son of the fishmonger, was one of them.

The Lost Gold Bracelet

I made a habit of getting up early in the morning before the camp waking hour. I preferred to go into the bathroom while no one else was there so my morning washing and shave could be thorough and relaxing. Even in Auschwitz, I enjoyed starting the morning fresh, ready for what was to come. Despite my empty stomach I was vigorous.

One day, while cleaning out one of the trucks, I discovered a homemade bar of soap concealed in a corner. An uncontrollable desire to feel something from home again caused me to take a risk. I smuggled the soap back to the camp. The next morning, when I started using it, I saw my hand was bleeding. I examined the soap and discovered something within it that looked like gold. I found a quiet corner and I began to crush the bar of soap in my hands. From inside, I pulled out a gold bracelet.

I had to act fast before anyone noticed me, but I could not stop thinking: a young man makes his sweetheart happy with a gold bracelet. She smiles at him and they kiss. Then the damned war changes everything. Together they make a bar of soap and push into it the jewelry that symbolizes their love. They hope it will help them later and decide that the woman will put the soap in her bag. Several

days later, when the people pour hurriedly out of the train, the bag remains on the cattle car, the car that has brought them to the death camp. On the platform, the stunned woman realizes that she has lost her precious soap. The gold bracelet will not save her.

Where are they now, this couple? What do they look like? What happened to them? Are they alive or have they already been turned into ash?

I returned from the world of my imagination to bitter reality and hid the bracelet inside my garment.

But what should I do? Where can I hide the little treasure until I decide?

If they catch me, I will meet a bad and bitter end. If I hide the bracelet in my bunk, it could be stolen.

I wrapped it in a rag and pushed it underneath my mattress. The next day, with an uneasy feeling I went to work in the garage. Every day in Auschwitz seemed like a year. During the day I wanted it to be night, and at night I wanted it already to be morning. At the end of the never-ending work day, we returned to camp. My heart was pounding so much, I thought it could be heard from a distance, I checked to see if the treasure was still there. It was. I hid it in my clothes and ran to look for Nandor. Only he would know what to do in such a situation. But as usual, when you search for someone you need, you cannot find them. I was under tremendous pressure and I made a supreme effort to hide it. Where is Nandor when I need him so badly?

I finally found him. Nandor and I hugged each other and in the process he took the bracelet from me. He did not risk looking at it and contented himself with the detailed description I gave him. Then he told me to wait and left. Half-an-hour later he returned. I was hoping for a smile. But Nandor did not smile anymore. I prayed that

he would smile again in his life.

Nevertheless, he had good news for me. Almighty Nandor had made a deal. In exchange for the gold bracelet, I would receive an extra slice of bread for the next two weeks.

It's hard to imagine today what another slice of bread meant at that time. We worked all day in the garage, and we got two slices in the morning and in the evening and some muddy soup at noon. We were hungry, insanely hungry. Strong self-discipline was needed to function to make it through the horrific days and nights. It took great mental prowess to believe that good would someday again prevail.

I did not judge those who threw themselves onto the electrified fence. They had lost the ability to believe. It could have happened to every one of us. How long can a person stand being so humiliated and so despised?

In a German concentration camp, one extra slice of bread gave you the strength to keep away from the electrified fence.

At this point in the war, the famine increased. Most of the prisoners had been in a state of malnutrition for several months, and the continued loss of weight weakened their body's immune systems. Many had diarrhea, which further aggravated their physical condition. Suffering from diarrhea in the camp was like holding a one-way ticket to oblivion. If you saw someone walking around camp and his pants were soiled, you were witnessing a flickering candle about to go out. The extra bread that had miraculously come my way for two weeks was an important boost for my body and mind.

Two Cracks in My Teeth

Every day brought its own new stories. Some were more memorable than others. I'll tell you a few of them.

One day, a truck driver in his late twenties, wearing a uniform and somewhat high-ranking, brought his truck into the garage. He turned to me and shouted: "Kum, kum, du drecksack" (Come here, you bag of shit). I approached him. He ordered me to wash his truck. In a Nazi concentration camp, you had to obey even those who approached you in this way.

Direct contact between German drivers and forced laborers was forbidden. He was supposed to speak with the foreman and the foreman would select the worker to perform the task. But I preferred not to get into a confrontation, and I did the job. I did it in my usual capable manner, polishing the outside and spotlessly cleaning the windows, and then I went to the German. He inspected the truck from all angles with an expression of satisfaction.

I am sensitive to insults. I mustered up the courage and said to him in German: "Why do you call me a bag of shit? Although I am a Jew, a prisoner, so thin my empty stomach sticks to my ribs, but for all that, I have been and returned from the Russian front." I felt I had made a terrible mistake, but I could not take back what I had

said. I had initiated an unnecessary conversation, grossly violating Nandor's rules.

The German was speechless. He did not expect me to have the nerve to strike up a conversation with him. What is more, my words stunned him. He looked me over from head to toe. "That can't be. Where were you?"

I began to name all the places I had passed through and worked in, from Novy Oskol, where we buried the dead of the Russian army, to Arkhangelskoya. The voice coming out of my throat was like a cocktail with several different tastes. There was dryness mixed with fear, plus an element of pride. I told him of our role in maintaining the roads to the Don River.

Again, he was incredulous. "And how did you get back?" He asked.

"On foot," I replied.

The German tilted his head slightly sideways, thinking for a moment, and said: "That's over a thousand kilometers. You cannot be a Jew!"

I replied, rather brazenly, that there was no difference between Jews and Germans or Hungarians. Everyone had lice or typhus on the retreat. When the Germans fled the Russians, they were just like any other soldiers who had been defeated in battle.

I knew I was going too far, but I could not resist. This arrogant man was nothing but a truck driver. What had he gone through compared to what I had endured?

In my stupidity, I did not notice that I had hit a sore point. The Germans saw the orders to advance to the Russian front as a death sentence. Anyone who returned from there was perceived as a hero. And here I was, the Jew who greasing his truck, telling him how I had come back from there - and on foot to boot.

He looked at me again, and repeated, "You cannot be a Jew."

I answered him with a hand gesture that meant, "It's a fact, what

can you do?" And I walked away.

Only then did it sink in how stupid I had been. I had shattered the German myth about the Jews. How will he react to that? After all, he could kill me to hide the fact that a Jew had returned from the Russian front. He stood there silently, got into his truck, and drove off. I was ashamed to tell Nandor or Dudi that evening how thoughtless I had been.

A few weeks later, the German returned to the garage. His truck had broken down after it was already loaded with Jewish luggage. He again spoke to directly and ordered me to unload the luggage and put it onto another truck.

I was glad. I believed it was an expression of trust, and the danger had passed. I estimated that the work would take two hours, and I did my best to arrange the luggage properly.

While I was working, Spielman, a diminutive Jew who worked with us in the garage, approached me and said, "Stern, throw me something."

That's all I needed. I threw him a few items that had fallen out of one of the suitcases – a bar of soap and a small bottle of perfume.

"What's this junk," he said. "Throw me a little suitcase."

I did not want any complications. On the other hand, it was hard for me to refuse my comrades. My approach and that of my two brothers was to support our fellow prisoners in need and help those who we could. I looked left and right, saw no danger, and threw him a small suitcase.

When I finished the job, I went to the German.

"Well, and what did you steal for yourself?" He asked.

I showed him my pockets were empty.

"You're not stupid enough to steal things and put them in your pocket. I saw you throw a suitcase at someone before. Go to the wall."

I know I was finished. I was sure he was going to take revenge on me for the racist myth I had shattered. Now he had caught me stealing. He could not have had a better reason to get rid of me.

The German began beating me. Precision punches to the face. Blood flowed from my ears and mouth. He cracked my perfect front teeth. I took it without uttering a sound and saw it angered him even more. Suddenly he said: "Now get out of here. I knew you weren't a Jew!"

I knew the Germans all had undergone target practice shooting at prisoners who were trying to escape.

I started muttering, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," the prayer that Jews intone as they head towards their death, and I walked away expecting to be shot. But it did not come.

I walked in the direction of the Polish garage workers. They received me with open arms as if I was a hero. The person in charge of me, a Pole from Silesia, pushed me underneath a truck, as if I were working on it. I lied down on the floor and burst into tears. I fell to pieces. All my fears and frustrations burst out of me. My friends approached and muffled my mouth with rags. It took me some time to calm down. I waited a few more days for the shot that did not come.

My two front teeth were cracked right in the middle. Two perfectly straight dark cracks on each tooth - German efficiency. Later in life, these cracks became my trademark. Every time I look in the mirror I smile. From the perspective of time, the price I paid for my stupidity was bearable. The German had gotten an important lesson.

As for Spielman, he apologized at the first chance he had for what had happened to me because of him, and he asked that I not give his name if I were summoned for questioning. He himself was clever enough to smuggle the contents of the suitcase into the camp. He hid it among the trash in the garage and slowly got the items into the camp. Little Spielman, too, was an accomplished organizer.

A Daring Escape

An alarm sounded in the middle of the workday. There had been an escape either from the camp or from one of the dozens of factories where prisoners were forcibly employed. Trains traveling in a 50 km radius from the camp were halted until the fugitive could be apprehended.

There were three main camps in the Auschwitz complex: Auschwitz 1, the first concentration camp set up by the Nazis, housed tens of thousands of Polish intellectuals and Russian prisoners who were systematically exterminated; Auschwitz 2, Birkenau, where the slaughter of the Jews was carried out in gas chambers; and Auschwitz 3, Monowitz, which operated as a labor camp, mainly for IG Farben, the largest chemical manufacturer in Germany. At its peak, when Jews were forced to work for free in its factories, it was the fourth largest enterprise in the world. Among other products, the company, together with Degussa, manufactured the Zyklon B gas that was used in the gas chambers.

In addition to the three main camps, there were about 40 subordinate camps in the area, where Jews also worked. The Praga Hella garage was one of them. Other factories were the Union Arms factories, Krupp AG, Siemens, and others. In all, approximately 30-40

thousand prisoners worked in them.

The Nuremberg Trials, held after the war, tried 185 senior Nazi criminals. Rudolf Hoess, commander of the huge Auschwitz complex, was one of the defendants. He estimated in his testimony that two-and-a-half million people had been slaughtered in the gas chambers and in the fire pits, and another half-a-million died of starvation and disease. Hoess was very successful in his job. The man who oversaw the dumping of children onto fires was caught hiding after the war in a small village near the Danish border.

The Auschwitz complex also had a significant impact on the German war economy. The free labor of tens of thousands of people, many of whom were employed in the manufacture of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment, was of great importance. The guarding of the camps was carefully planned, with guard towers and electric fences on all sides. Escape was considered a failure of the security system, and the Nazis did everything they could to prevent it from happening. When the alarm sounded, Germans took the dogs and went out after the escapees. Hundreds of soldiers were assigned to the search parties. In the history of this hell, very few people have managed to break out and not be caught.

It was soon discovered that the fugitive was a Jew who worked with us at Prague Hella. He had been sent to work outside and managed to jump onto a freight train when it slowed down near his work site at the same time each day. He had planned and carried out his escape with great courage, but he was caught 40 km from the camp.

The next morning, when we left the barracks for work, a horrifying sight awaited us at the camp gate. The Germans had crucified the escapee on a huge upright board, his hands outstretched to the sides. Nails had been hammered into his hands and feet and on both sides of his crotch. His face was battered black and blue, swollen

from blows. And his eyes were wide open. He was still alive. Below the cross was a sign: "So it shall be done to all who try to escape." The message was clear. "Jews, it is better for you to live in hell." In the garage, it was a gloomy and solemn day. Without a word, we honored in our hearts the memory of this man. Sadly, I never knew his name. May his memory be blessed!

Terror in the Lineups

The lineups at Auschwitz were held at scheduled hours. They were called "Appellplatz".

They took place outside in all weather conditions. Not infrequently, they lasted for hours, the first one at sunrise and the second in the evening. There were also impromptu lineups, more frightening than the regular ones. It could mean a selection, new diktats, or just another way to terrorize the prisoners.

At the start of October 1944, more and more of these sudden lineups were for selections. The Germans knew the war was coming to an end and they were going to lose. It was imperative for them to exterminate as many Jews as possible, and the tension in the lineups was overwhelming. Even healthy people were sent to their deaths, and if luck was ever needed at Auschwitz, it was now, and sevenfold.

The regular lineups checked attendance. They also set a framework for the day - before and after work and upon return. These scheduled lineups were so rigidly controlled that even the sick and exhausted who could hardly stand were dragged to their feet onto the grounds. Whoever was alive was counted and recorded, and anyone who was dead was taken off the list. The block supervisors were also tense, worried that people in their group might not be lined up

properly or numbered imprecisely.

People from many blocks were concentrated on the parade grounds during these lineups, sometimes from the entire camp. The tension was extreme. Those who were unfit for work and those who looked weak or sick were ordered to move to the side. It was clear to them and to all present that they were doomed. All this was conducted in an atmosphere of terror. Anyone who moved or did something unexpected was in trouble. If anyone of your close friends was among those sent to the side, you could not even say goodbye to them.

There were no tears at the lineups. Abuse, public punishment and even executions by hanging or gunfire were daily occurrences.

If it turned out that a prisoner was missing, all hell broke loose. The block supervisor would run frantically and do a thorough search of the block. If he found anyone asleep or hiding, or had simply 'given up', he dragged him to the parade grounds. One could then see on the face of Kadop, who oversaw the lineups, that something was about to happen.

The reluctant prisoner was brought to the center of the grounds. Kadop, muttering in anger, would wave his hand as if about to slap him. The prisoner instinctively recoiled, and then a hard blow from the elbow landed on his face. Kadop was well-trained for his job and excelled at creating terror. The blow would cause several teeth to shake loose. If more serious damage had not been inflicted, it would have ended 'merely' with blood bursting out of the 'criminal's' nose and ears.

Every Sunday, checking for lice was carried out. The block supervisor was also responsible for the cleanliness of the "tenants" of his block, and he lived in constant fear that it would be discovered that one of them was infested with lice. In the eyes of the Germans, this was considered a failure of the person in charge.

We underwent the examination for lice in summer as well as in winter, while we were naked. The temperature could drop to minus 15 degrees in winter, and if lice were discovered on a prisoner, the whole block would have to be sprayed with disinfectant.

It was humiliating and painful, but there is no doubt that the Germans' compulsive strictness for cleanliness and disinfection meant that diseases did not spread among the prisoners. At least we were spared this curse. As someone who had experienced typhus, I appreciated that fact.

Frieda's Baby

I take a moment here to tell a personal family story about the horror of the lineups. During our last few days at home, my mother asked me to take particular care of my sister-in-law Frieda, who was pregnant. In the first selection, Mengele did not notice her condition, although she was already in the advanced stages. On one of the first nights in the women's block, Frieda gave birth to her first born, a baby boy. This meant only one thing: a death sentence for baby and mother. But there were older, tough women on the block. They did not consult the new mother, who had just arrived in hell, and they covered the baby's face with clothes until he suffocated. The veteran prisoners told the horrified Frieda that it would be better for her own life to be spared. The baby would have died soon anyway, and in agony. They also told her that she must report for the morning lineup. If she would have to be dragged from the block to the lineup, she would be doomed.

Frieda marshaled all her strength. Laden with grief at the killing of her newborn and in pain from giving birth in such bizarre conditions, she reported for the morning lineup and made it through.

I learned of this excruciating event only after the war. We never spoke of it within the family.

A Cure from the Fire

I got diarrhea in early 1945. Although this could be expected in such a camp, I was still surprised. I am careful of my personal hygiene by nature, and even in the worst of situations I had kept clean and was cautious of the food I ate. Despite the harsh famine conditions in the camp, I would not eat what looked to me to be spoiled. I saw people around me with diarrhea. It broke their spirits. An older person weighing 40 kg had no chance of recovering from it. Most of them looked like the walking dead.

I thought I would get over it, but it was too much for me. As days passed, it got worse. It took every ounce of strength to get out of the bunk in the morning, get to the lineup and go to work. One day, when the workers in the garage lit a fire to boil some water, I got an idea. I remembered that charcoal pills were prescribed to stop diarrhea. I took some coals out of the fire, cooled them, crumbled them, and swallowed the small pieces of coal. The improvised treatment worked and cured the diarrhea.

I also gained two more bonuses in addition to my quick recovery. First, I got my self-confidence back and my faith that with my determination and ability I could cope with anything. For a while I had been having doubts. I felt that the resourcefulness I showed in my

Labor Force period had disappeared. My inspiration to use the coal had revived my spirits. Once again I believed that I would be able to manage and survive. In a concentration camp, what is a person without hope?

Another benefit from the coal 'discovery' was surprising. Word of the miracle cure passed by word of mouth and spread throughout the camp. Many people came to consult with me. I helped them and expanded my circle of acquaintances. The end of the war was approaching. It was hard to foresee what would happen with the camp. What would the Germans do with the 30,000 people imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau? Kill them all? How? When? Maybe a rebellion will finally break out? Now more than ever, friends were the most essential thing for a man to have.

Surgery on the Roof

There was a terrible burning pain in my left palm! Another worker who was transferring a molten iron rod accidentally brushed my palm with it. The pain was excruciating. I went to the overseer. He bandaged the hand, looking worried. I went back to him before the end of the work day, and he replaced the larger bandage with a smaller one, so that it would not attract attention at the entrance gate to the camp. I arranged with my friends to be in the middle of the rows so as not to attract attention to the wound.

Nandor was already waiting for me in the camp. Via his intelligence network, he had immediately received the message that I had been injured. I looked in his eyes when he saw the burn. Their expression did not bode well for me. For the next few days I continued to work as usual, with a long sleeve covering my palm. Nandor changed the bandage every night, but my condition got worse. An infection spread from the injured palm, the lymph nodes in my armpits swelled, and I could not use the hand at all. The man in charge of the garage showed greatness of character and a willingness to help. He arranged for me to have an "easy" job. I lay hidden underneath large trucks and used only my right hand. It was difficult, but possible.

A few days passed, and the situation deteriorated. I had fever

and the inflammation affected my whole body. After all I had been through it was ridiculous to die from a hand injury. But what is a big brother in a concentration camp for? As usual, Nandor found a solution. My brother was amazing. He located a Jewish doctor who agreed to operate on me. The man was a surgeon who had served on German warships and was skilled in emergency treatment.

Imagine a doctor serving on warships, an impressive officer in the uniform of the German navy. He was a man who dedicated his life to military service. He had children or nieces and nephews who were fascinated by his uniform and his stories when he came home on leave. He was a hero in their eyes. They, too, wanted to serve their country, Germany, in due course. And suddenly the rules of the game changed. The Nazis come to power, and the officer doctor suddenly became an enemy of the people. He was scornfully stripped of his fancy uniform and sent to a forced labor camp, on his way to death. What had changed? What had he done wrong? Nothing. He was unlucky. He was born into a Jewish family.

A date was set for the surgery. After work, we climbed onto the roof of the block, and two of my friends volunteered for the role of "anesthetists." One of them sat on me so I would not move. The other held both my arms tightly. A wet rag was shoved into my mouth. The doctor began the operation. Nandor stood watch. He circled the block building, which helped to relieve his tension. The doctor cut into the wound with a spoon that had been sterilized in a flame, and drained a large amount of pus out, cleansing the injured bone. The pain was horrendous. I could not shout, but tears poured out of my eyes.

Within a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, the "surgery" was over. My hand was bandaged, and I was sent to rest. Before going to bed, the doctor snuck into the block. If he had been caught only for

that, he would have been severely punished, let alone for performing the surgery. Several friends cooperated and made certain no guard saw him enter. He replaced my bandage with a smaller one.

The next day I went to work as usual. My body was still feverish, and I grunted in pain. Fortunately, the Polish overseer once again behaved magnanimously and cooperated fully.

It is important to note here that many Polish people approved of Nazi racist ideology. They happily accepted the plan to rid Poland and Europe of Jews. They also were happy to appropriate Jewish homes and property of the deported Jews. They had no problem betraying them, even burning them alive. However, there were also other kinds of Poles.

These were humane, decent people, not racists. Poland suffered greatly in World War II. The Germans conquered it, destroyed large parts of the country, and abused the civilian population. The principle was simple: whoever was a racist before the war was racist during the war and found ways to vent their dark urges. Whoever was not a racist was not made one by the war and they found ways to express their humanity.

Nandor was able to obtain Ultraseptil for me. The coveted antibiotic came straight from the German staff clinic. In Rudolf Hoess' worst imaginings he could not have conceived of a situation where a Jew could recover from an operation in his camp thanks to antibiotics intended for Nazi soldiers. But that is what happened. A few more days passed, and I recovered and was able to function normally. By the way, Hoess, who was the first commander of Auschwitz, came back there in mid-1944 to personally verify that the Hungarian Jews were being exterminated efficiently, according to schedule.

"Therefore, Choose Life"

World War I had weakened religious beliefs among Christians and Jews and accelerated a process that had begun in the mid-19th century. The tens of millions who died in vain in the "Great War" raised hard questions in the hearts of those who believed in the "Almighty, the Great and Good, and all-powerful God." Many Jews, especially a significant number who were Hungarian and German, turned away from religion and became secular. However, although the Jews gave up a religious way of life and stopped adherence to some of the commandments, they retained their traditions and their culture. They continued to regard education as having the highest value. Instead of learned Torah scholars, Jews became physicians, lawyers, engineers, and businessmen; many of them excelled in their chosen professions. The ethos of diligence continued to bear fruit. It soon became customary and widespread for a German gentile to speak of his "Jewish doctor," or "Jewish lawyer." He prided himself on hiring the best.

But racism has its own rules, and its roots run deep. Between the two world wars, Germany was thrown into an economic crisis. The draconian sanctions imposed on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles resulted in raging hyperinflation, causing a severe economic

slowdown resulting in soaring personal and national debt. But in 1929, a severe economic crisis also arose in the United States that led to the Great Depression. The stock market collapsed, and the Weimar Republic in Germany started to collapse. Unemployment sharply increased, and the financial institutions went bankrupt. Amidst this chaos there was one man who offered a magical solution: Adolf Hitler. The Nazi party blamed the Jews for the worldwide crisis. In the press and in other publications they were branded as "inferior and immoral creatures." A torrent of harassment began, culminating in the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933, and the application of suppressive racial laws.

Jews comprised less than one percent of Germany's population when the Nazis came to power – 500,000 out of 70 million. The accusations leveled at them were ridiculous. The Jews had no such capability to do anything damaging to the Germans or the German economy and that was most certainly not their intention. The Jews had no reason or desire to harm their homeland. They considered themselves Germans, and an integral part of the citizenry.

The 1935, Nuremberg Laws declared the Germans as a superior race and labeled the Jews and other peoples as inferior. These laws laid the foundation for the extermination of the Jews. In the early stages, the licenses of Jewish doctors and lawyers were revoked. I suppose the doctor who operated on me went through this process of degradation. In the end, he, too, was thrown into a concentration camp.

We lived in the most abysmal depths of deprivation imaginable. The Nazis held us captive through power and violence. We were constantly hungry, teetering on the edge of a high cliff. Even without being pushed, one misstep and you could fall into the abyss from dizziness caused by hunger. Any little bit of bad luck could cause you

to collapse and die.

The scariest thing was to collapse from a mental breakdown. This is not what Judaism teaches us. The Torah explicitly instructs us: "Choose life."

The first imperative was to maintain an optimistic spirit. Find a glimmer of light in the pitch darkness, even when surrounded by hundreds of demonic Nazis. I believed we would defeat the evil forces against us.

I have a permanent scar on my left palm. It brings to mind my courageous friends, who with their goodwill and compassion enabled me to heal from a severe injury. The doctor who operated, and my comrades who held me and kept me down; I remember them all with everlasting gratitude. And I cherish my brother Nandor's daring and resourcefulness, for sustaining me and strengthening me time and time again.

The End Draws Near

Day by day, rumors grew that the Russians were approaching, and the end of the war was near. This information created tension among the Germans as well as the Jews. Those who were optimistic remained so saying to themselves "I have survived up to now and I will continue to survive until the end of the war. We will be free." The pessimists were sure that at the very last minute the Germans would annihilate us all, mainly to conceal evidence of the most noxious war crimes in human history.

Some of the German staff and soldiers changed their ways. Incredibly, they suddenly started to be 'nice'. This was an attempt to get in the good graces of the prisoners, in case they were put on trial. Others hid silver and gold and other valuables. These men were already looking for an escape route. Nandor, who was privy to what was going on among Germans, told us about these frantic preparations. We smiled to ourselves. People in trouble are the same, even the "Master Race." They do exactly what the Jews did when the skies above clouded over.

The High German Command increased their control of the lower echelons. They treated with severity any staff member who deviated from the strict instructions and increased the presence of SS men in

the camp. This was to prevent any laxity in staff behavior as well as to prevent a prisoner uprising.

This situation was to our benefit. But my brother Dudi was in a terrible state. Although he had experienced far less severe traumas than Nandor or me, Dudi was on the verge of a mental breakdown. He teetered between choosing life or death. I did all I could to give him support. The manager of the garage also did his share, and always tried to put both of us on the same job. That way I could help by doing the heavy work. I also gave him half my food. Hunger was literally driving him mad. Nothing helped. He was ready to say farewell to the land of the living.

I asked Nandor to find a solution. He was a prisoner like everyone else and his capabilities were limited, despite his skills and connections. Yet once again he did it; he solved the problem. Events played a big part in this. Workers at the camp staff's dental clinic had stolen gold for a possible escape, and the SS discovered the theft. Some of the culprits were tried and imprisoned, and others were sent to do more difficult jobs. The German dentist who treated the staff now lacked an assistant, and with no other choice, he sought a dentist from among the Jewish prisoners.

In the beginning of our internment when the Germans were looking for dentists, we were careful. Dudi did not disclose he had those skills. It was clear that whoever raised his hand at that time would be sent to the Sonderkommando and would end up in the gas chamber. But now, Nandor made sure that Dudi would be on the short list of candidates for the position of assistant dentist.

Dudi weighed less than 50 kg on a frame that was almost six feet tall, but he managed to mobilize the personal charm that had worked on the women in Bratislava, and it worked on the dentist. He was chosen. There was only one small problem. Dudi's profession of

record was locksmith.

Just a few weeks previously, a man caught lying to the Germans was beaten and shot. At this moment, however, the German dentist was prepared to let the lie slip but made Dudi pass a test. This was not just any test; he would have to build an extensive dental bridge for the dentist's wife. A calamity! Now the wife was involved in the decision.

The doctor took the measurements for the bridge, and when Dudi was faced with this challenge he rose to meet it. At the end of the day, the bridge was built to perfection. The wife was pleased, the dentist declared it the most beautiful bridge he had ever seen and Dudi became the doctor's assistant. He joined the staff, still as a Jewish prisoner but with much improved living conditions, and most importantly, plenty of food.

Dudi did not forget me. When I came back from the garage on his first day at the dental clinic, he was waiting for me with a container full of rice and plums. Rice and plums in Auschwitz! I had to find a place to hide to eat it. The others could pounce on me and snatch the food away, and in any case I did not want to arouse jealousy.

Additional signs showed that things were changing. The Polish forced laborers, who, as I have already said, were mainly political prisoners, had enjoyed better conditions than ours and had not been starved. Many of them served as foremen in the factories, and they were also the middlemen between the Jews and the Germans. Now the Poles were being sent out of Auschwitz and transferred to camps in Silesia or Germany.

The Poles hated the Russians. This was a centuries-old hatred. But both nations hated the Nazis even more. The Germans felt it. They feared that the Poles would cooperate with the Russians and preferred to keep them away from them. For me, this was another sign that the Germans were organizing their capitulation.

There was another 'amusing' sign of change. The Germans had a brothel in Block 24. The women were non-Jewish prisoners, and the place was intended for use by staff members and the Polish factory foremen. Entrance coupons to the brothel were traded just like food. The Germans closed the brothel, spreading a rumor that it would reopen, this time with Jewish women for the enjoyment of Jewish prisoners. It was part of their strategy of disinformation - this time it was a really bad joke.

Since August, we watched tens of thousands of workers being evacuated and sent to concentration camps and factories in Germany. There was no doubt that the Nazis were imploding. As usual, they also carried out their retreat with precision planning and strict order.

Death March

By January 1945, we had spent almost nine months in this unthinkable place. Ice and snow shrouded the camp, and every other minute someone came running with the latest rumor. People's imaginations ran wild. One thing was clear: the gas chamber extermination apparatus had stopped. The smoke that had spewed forth tiny fragments of millions of human beings, no longer blocked out the sun. For three-and-half years it had polluted the skies. Had God awoken from his slumber?

I paid no attention to the rumors. I had learned on the way to Russia to deal with reality and not speculation. I hoped that Nandor would bring me reliable information in good time that would help me prepare for what would actually happen. We finally had the answer: the Germans had decided to evacuate the Jews. A march to oblivion…a "Death March."

In contrast to the terror tactics and iron discipline that had prevailed in the camp, things were now more flexible. There seemed to be ways to avoid the march. The camp was huge and there were many hiding places. Some people prepared hiding places for themselves in the factories where they worked.

In the moment of truth there will be those who choose to stay

behind and not go on the march, some of them because of their physical condition. Most decided to go ahead, for two reasons. One was the herd instinct, the urge to stay together with the majority. The second was the fear that the Russians would bomb the entire area, to destroy the strategic factories surrounding the camp.

Dudi was in the staff hospital, after contracting typhus. Typhus in a staff member also testified to the loosening of camp discipline, but that was not what was on our minds as Nandor and I gathered around Dudi's bed. It was one of the rare moments when we could consult each other in seclusion; in a closed room, just the three of us. We had usually avoided gathering in one place together. Others had had their entire families annihilated, and we did not want anyone to be envious of us for having thus far survived.

Our previous meetings were short and to the point. But here we were, all by ourselves. We had to decide: where each of us would go so that at least one of the Stern brothers would survive? How could we make sure that there would be at least one remnant of the family left alive? Dudi thought of the options available to him. He believed that the Germans would blow up the hospital with everyone inside. "I better join the march," he said. He gathered all his remaining strength, got out of bed, got dressed, and then collapsed and fainted. We realized he was not fit for the march and he had to stay in bed and meet his fate, whatever it would be. I helped him undress and get back under the blanket. These were terrible moments. Nandor stood to the side with tears in his eyes. We hugged Dudi and left him, weighed down with sorrow. We did not know if we would meet again. Such moments are brief, but they sear the soul.

That left Nandor and me. What now? What do we decide? What is the right thing to do?

After a few minutes of silence, Nandor spoke. He thought that

I, who was 'young and strong', should join those leaving the camp. I thought to myself how everything is relative. What exactly does 'strong' mean after nine months of hard labor and constant hunger? Nandor was not impressed by these facts. He had seen the Germans readying a supply of bread and other provisions for the marchers. He believed I would receive the gift of life by going on the march.

Nandor himself had another problem. He feared he didn't have the strength for the march, but he was worried by his seniority in the camp. He had spent three years in Auschwitz. Few survived such a long time; few had seen the horrors he had seen. He worked at the hospital as a nurse, and the hospital was located in block number 20. Patients from the German staff were hospitalized there, and he treated them. There were also Jewish and Polish patients, and there was a Nazi "medical laboratory." Those who worked on the block knew very well what was going on in the lab.

Black Hearts in White Coats - Monsters in Doctors' Attire

In their insane obsession to improve the Aryan race, the Nazis conducted experiments on humans on two opposite tracks. Prof. Karl Clauberg was looking for a simple and inexpensive means to sterilize women. The intention was to sterilize women of the Slavic race, who were considered inferior by the Germans. The Nazis coveted the agricultural lands and natural resources of the Slavs, and dreamed of an invincible Germany, which would rule the world for a thousand years. To do that they had to occupy the territory but dilute the population.

Clauberg tortured the women that were brought to his ward. He forced them to have intercourse with men he chose from among the prisoners, he inseminated them with animal sperm, irradiated them with X-rays in an attempt to sterilize them, and carried out horrifying sterilization methods on them such as injecting acid into their uterus without anesthesia.

The Nazis dream was to destroy the entire world Jewish population of 16 million, and to sterilize tens of millions of Slavic women, mainly in Poland and Russia. Clauberg was a pure sadist, who also mocked the women he tortured. He was captured by the Russians

and sentenced to 23 years in prison. After seven years, he was transferred to West Germany in a prisoner exchange and died in prison while awaiting the start of another trial. The monster in doctors' clothing sat in jail a total of seven years, a mere seven years.

Another demon was Dr. Joseph Mengele. Mengele was awarded the "War Merit Cross" of the German army for utilizing "scientific material at his disposal... and for his outstanding contribution to the field of anthropology." He worked in the opposite direction: how do you get more women to give birth to twins? How do you increase the fertility and birth rate of the Aryan race? He operated on twins who were prisoners in the camp, performing despicable experiments on their bodies with no anesthesia. This was the "scientific material at his disposal," which earned him his medal of merit.

Mengele fled to South America after the war. The Vatican provided him and other senior Nazis with diplomatic or red cross passports. This allowed them to elude justice for their heinous crimes. Who could believe such a thing? The Vatican was never held accountable for its actions during and after the war. Why?

We Go Our Three Separate Ways

Nandor had worked for more than two years in Block 10. He saw how the Germans treated prisoners who were nearing death in the most cost-effective way. Instead of wasting a pill on them, they injected phenolic acid into their hearts. Those unlucky enough to be taken unawares died excruciating deaths. Nandor knew who the abusers were and who enjoyed murdering the prisoners. He had reason to believe that the cunning Nazis would eliminate all witnesses to their actions.

In our brief meetings, he spoke of the horrors he had seen to ease his mental torment, if only a little. Nandor saw and heard everything from up close. And he himself had to be vigilant to avoid the sadists who roamed the block. "I have no choice," Nandor said. "But to hide somewhere in the camp." I was not convinced that this was the right thing to do. I was not convinced about the second choice either. Who knows where the Nazis were marching us? How could a march be conducted with so many prisoners? The Nazis had been the pursuers in the war and now they had become the pursued. It was dangerous and scary.

After more deliberation I made up my mind. I would join the march. To Nandor's reasoning I added another: two brothers were

staying in Auschwitz. It was important to spread the risk.

We embraced and wept when we parted. As I turned away, Nandor's gaze fell on my shoes. He held his head in his hands.

"How will you march in those ragged things? Come with me to the warehouse."

And so, for a final time, Nandor used his connections for me. I went on the harsh and frightening march wearing the finest boots and heavy woolen socks you could ever wish for in the winter of 1945 in Auschwitz. They would have made a Nazi officer proud, let alone a bedraggled Jewish prisoner.

There were a few happy moments, even in the war. We parted again, patting each other on the shoulder. It was risky to show emotion in front of others.

As long as Nandor was with me, I felt his protective presence. Now we were separating. What would the new day bring? I always knew that Nandor was energetic, clever, and convivial. The nine months I had "enjoyed" with him made it clear to me that he was also exceptionally brilliant. I did not want anything bad to happen to this remarkable man. I pictured him after the war, rebuilding his life with a new family and becoming the success he deserved to be.

Step by Step by Step

As I was leaving the clinic, I came across Fritzi, the son of the fishmonger from Pressburg. When I had seen him in the garage, he was wearing a soldier's uniform. This time he wore a field worker's clothes. He whispered in my ear that this was probably the last time we would meet. He was being sent to guard the marchers. "Be towards the front of the column," he urged me, with a beseeching look in his eyes. "The ones in the back will come to a bitter end. We were told that the fewer the Jews who survive, the less revenge would be taken on us."

Fritzi said he would be placed at the front of the column. "Where are we going?" I asked. "In the direction of Silesia. There you will board a train. I don't know to where." Trains again, I thought to myself. What a nightmare. I was bolstered by knowing that there was a purpose and direction to the march. I had thought this was the end of the war, but it was not. This is not the end. I must continue to be vigilant. The danger wasn't over.

I described in brief at the beginning of the book, what would happen to us the following night. We were tired and mentally drained. In a dream I had repeatedly, I saw myself in my house in the village, the house that was no longer ours. I wanted to sleep outside in the

fresh air and eat fish from the creek. I needed the strength that had been drained from me.

But breaking down was not an option. I got my energy back with the best fuel of all: belief in myself. I repeated over and over, "You have made it so far and you will continue to make it, whatever happens." In any case, I knew that Fritzi's intentions were good, and I heeded his advice.

We were ordered to line up in rows of five, men only. Women were evacuated separately.

Each marcher was given a loaf of bread. During the commotion, I pushed my way to the front of the column. Towards evening, when darkness had already begun to fall, in the bitter cold and snow of January 18, 1945, we set out on the "Death March." We did not know what to expect. How long would we march, and to where?

While getting organized I found two old friends. We decided to band together and take care of each other. In difficult moments, there is nothing like a word of encouragement from people dear to you. And so, walking beside me on one side was Siegel from Munkács and on the other, Bondi Steiner from Satmar. They had both been with me in the Labor Service. They were, like me, on the same random list of men whose last name began with the letter 'S' and had been sent from Košice to Mohács. In the four years we served together, we had become friends, tried and true.

I looked back. I could not see the end of the column. There were thousands of starving Jewish prisoners guarded by hundreds of tense Nazi soldiers.

Somehow the column got organized and the march began. We soon understood how the Germans were planning to march such a huge mass of people who could barely walk. It was again the usual Nazi method of terror. At the end of the column were professional assassins

from the SS. They were assigned two tasks: the first was to pressure the marchers from behind by firing their weapons. If the marchers in the rear moved fast, the whole column would move faster. If they killed some people in the rear, their screams would spread fear to the others, and they would move forward quickly to escape the shots. Thus, their second task was to reduce the number of marchers.

But shooting from the rear can make people scatter and run. The flanks of the column also had to be kept under control. For this purpose, the entire Auschwitz administration staff was recruited. Drivers, work overseers, the medical staff, and the like, all accompanied the procession. Fritzi was one of them. Alongside every few rows was a German marching, armed with a submachine gun. Anyone who was slow or did not obey an order accurately enough was shot. The German dragged him out of line, so as not to disrupt the marchers behind him and so that the others would see what happens to those who do not move quickly enough or disobey. If someone bent down to tie his shoelaces, he was trampled by those who followed him. If he fell and could not rise, he was shot and dragged out of line. There were those who chose to take their shoes off and walk barefoot with their feet wrapped in rags, rather than stop tie their shoelaces. A mass of thousands of prisoners was marching behind. You could not hesitate for a second, otherwise you were dead. German terror tactics dictated the pace.

All night we heard shots and screams of the wounded from behind us. Whoever hoped of possibly surviving had to keep marching. After three hours, I thought I had reached my limit; that I could not go on anymore. My feet were aching terribly, the muscles throbbing with pain. I felt like I was walking on bone.

The fear of being shot and the terrible uncertainty made my pulse race madly. My heart was pounding at a murderous rate in my chest. A violent, rhythmic drumbeat thundered in my ears. My head felt

like it was exploding and still made the effort to go on. I had walked for five hours, then seven, and then ten hours straight. My body was falling apart. My body was parched from my stomach to my throat. Step by step by step...

The effort it takes to get your foot out of the snow requires concentration and strength. It was a mental challenge that did not let up for a second. Why go on? Where were we heading?

The war was almost over, and in the end they would kill us all anyway. You could put a stop to the suffering easily. All you had to do is step out of line. I, along with my friends and the thousands who were marching with us, understood that whoever was wounded would be thrown to the side and bleed to death in agony. Thousands were tormented by the question: was it better to die from exhaustion or slowly bleed to death? Give up or go on? Despite the dreadful fears flashing through my brain, I understood the rules of the game.

Fritzi was right. The SS mercilessly slaughtered those at the back of the column. Thank you, my friend, for the priceless advice.

You can sometimes fall asleep while walking. I knew that if I bumped into something and fall, it would mean my immediate end. I struggled with my thoughts and concentrated on getting through the present moment and another moment all night long until the break of dawn.

It was vital to remain alert and aware. I remembered the words of Dr. Marton, when I walked, sick with typhus at the very limits of my strength: "Do not think of yesterday or tomorrow, only how to get through this moment. That is your mission. Only by doing so will you be able to complete it."

It was hard. I imagined Dudi and Nandor. What was happening to them right now? I pushed the thoughts away and concentrated on the moment...and yet another moment...all through the night.

The solidarity with my friends was wonderful. Siegel and Steiner were strong in spirit, perhaps stronger than me. We were an invincible trio. Beyond encouraging and supporting each other, we carefully observed the Germans. Our great fear was of a guard falling asleep while marching. When he woke up with a start, he would automatically pull the trigger. Anyone in front of such a German soldier would be hurt or worse.

If we saw a German fall asleep while marching, we would change our position in the line. Most importantly, we would rouse each other if one of us started to doze off.

Shortly before dawn we heard a dense barrage of firing coming nearer. We were afraid we soon would be shot. We trudged on with all our strength, watching the sunrise.

When it was daylight we came to a spacious meadow. We were ordered to halt, huddle closer and sit down. We were permitted to sleep. The mission was deemed a success. The Germans shot but the caravan passed, and the three of us were part of it. I looked around for Fritzi. I wanted to say thank you to him from afar. To my disappointment, I could not locate him among the guards.

If I say that there were ten thousand prisoners there, it would not be an exaggeration. The scene resembled a vast football stadium. There were huge numbers of prisoners despite the massive shootings all through the night. We estimated that at least 15,000 people were gone from the ranks.

The Germans circled us, guarding us on all sides. We were delighted. As long as they were surrounding us, we were safe. They would not risk shooting their comrades on the opposite side of the circle. Yet we knew that we had not reached our final destination. The Germans had simply collapsed from fatigue. They themselves were desperate for some rest.

60 Kilometers in One Night

The scene that greeted me on the morning of January 19, in an unplowed field in Lower Silesia, was surreal. The prisoners and their captives had fallen into a deep sleep. The Jews were in the center with the Germans encircling them. A small number of guards remained awake. We, too, organized ourselves so that one of the three of us would always be awake. We wanted to be the first to know if this was a trap.

We were near Wodzisław Śląski, 60 km from Auschwitz. In a single night without rest, in freezing cold and snow, dressed in rags and racked with hunger, we had walked this distance. All around us there had been a non-stop "symphony" of shooting, shouts of Germans and cries of the casualties – all in the pitch dark. It is not clear who was more stressed, the Jews or the Germans.

To stay alive on the Death March, two things were necessary: first and foremost, excellent connections with the gods of good fortune. The second, physical condition. Before the march, all the prisoners had lived in conditions of constant hunger, forced labor and terror - some for a few months and others for as long as two years. Physical robustness played a major role in the chances for survival.

Like a Herd of Cattle

The Nazis were like cowboys moving large herds of cattle across some prairie. Everything was permissible; the main thing was to keep the caravan advancing. But we were less than cattle. Cowboys keep a watchful eye on every cow, while us they took pleasure in killing.

And so, towards evening, they led us to a railroad track and crammed us into cattle cars. The three of us took our place by the narrow window, the only one in the car. Others preferred the corners. We clung closely to the window while standing, and with our fingers licked the layer of ice that had formed on the glass. We took turns keeping watch. It was bitter cold, and it was certain that the liquid from the ice had helped. The stress and fatigue were unbearable. Changing shifts passed the time and moderated the tension.

The crowding was insufferable. People who had caught cold during the march were coughing. People defecated and urinated. People wept. My blood boiled. I prayed for the day when the Germans would pay the price for their crimes.

Very soon people began to die around us. Someone who had managed to get through the Death March, someone who could finish a marathon, succumbed and gave up. Even the strongest broke down and collapsed. We could not help. There was no water and

no medicine. We did not have the strength to comfort the weeping and the dying. The only thing we could do was lay the dying person down on the floor of the car. We piled up the dead to make room for the living.

The train journey lasted four days and nights. In the middle we had a short break. We received a bit of food and drink. The dead were not removed from the car.

At one point we felt the train sporadically move back and forth. We were the lowest priority compared to other trains. They diverted us many times to a side track so that other trains could go past. Who cares about a trainload of Jews, some of whom were already dead?

The train finally came to a stop at the Gross Rosen concentration camp, this time inside Germany. We had traveled 260 km, a half-day's journey, but the Nazis had imprisoned us in cattle cars for four days and four nights.

I was forever thankful for my friends. Together we had overcome the impossible; we were a team that triumphed over everything and gave the middle finger to the most despicable people in the world. The finger was trembling with hunger, but it was backed by an indestructible spirit.

The Warsaw "Frenchmen"

The dead bodies were removed from the cars and thrown on a large pile. I do not know whether there were hundreds or thousands of bodies there. I began to think that train travel had become a method of extermination for the Nazis. Each train had 30 cars. Each car was packed with 100 people. Afterwards they kept us on the tracks for days and even an entire week without food or water. Half of the people died, 1,500 Jews on each train. Those who survived were sent to perform hard labor. In three weeks, they, too, would die. No problem, a new shipment would be imported from Auschwitz.

We understood that the Nazis had decided that the extermination of the Jews would continue until Germany fell.

Those who were still on their feet were led to long blocks. Once again, we were put into dense wooden bunks, but there was something new at Gröss Rosen; it was run by Jews. More precisely, Polish Jewish smugglers who were captured in France and sent to concentration camps. Or in short, and in mockery, they were called the "Warsaw Frenchman."

The Germans quickly realized that they, with their criminal culture, could be exploited against their Jewish brethren. They were right. It is hard to describe the violent conduct of our own people

towards us. They abused us in every way, mostly mocking our physical condition. What we had gone through and what we had lost meant nothing to them. They blamed us for our situation, as if we could have done something about it.

Gross Rosen was a transit camp. Poland was being occupied by the Allies, and it was a shame for the Germans to lose the forced laborers. We kept a low profile to avoid clashes with the Jewish monitors and especially with the Germans and awaited the next step.

As usual, we were in a fog of uncertainty: where would they take us? Would we be saved or die? The suspenseful story was not yet over.

The Three Winners

Recently, I saw on TV how people are crammed into trains in Tokyo during morning rush hour. The train arrives at a station filled to capacity, with hundreds of more people waiting on the platform on their way to work, with "pusher" attendants shoving them forcefully into the already crowded cars. The passengers stand crammed in all the way, on top of each other. Not an inch of space. At the next station, the same thing: the train would stop and the attendants shoved in a few hundred more people.

Now, imagine that hijackers take over the train and seize it for a week.

They travel all over Japan, back and forth, the passenger hostages have no food or drink, no place to defecate, and they are in a state of terrible fear. They have no idea when and where the nightmare will end, and what will happen to them. The kidnappers do not communicate with the hostages. Horror is etched on their faces. There are older people and the sick among them. They collapse one by one. There is no room to lie them down, and they die standing up. Those who are still alive are starving and racked with thirst. Over time they become violent. To improve their situation they hurt others. And the Japanese in the train are helpless.

After about a week at Gross Rosen, they crowded us all together. Each of us received a thin slice of practically transparent bread, and again they pushed and shoved and stuffed us into cattle cars, at an unparalleled density. Into a car that can accommodate 60 people in high density, they threw in 120. This time they spoke to us. They promised we would reach our destination in a few hours. But that "few hours" ride was the most horrible of them all. It lasted seven days and seven nights, traveling aimlessly. Every day we rode a few miles, and then were transferred, to a side track where we waited for hours before the train traveled back in the direction from which we came.

Three days of this treatment and people started to die. Others went insane. This would mostly happen when close relatives, family members and friends died in their arms. They begged and implored them with shouts and cries to rise. All the people crammed in with us in the car knew what we knew: it would be impossible to survive this journey without support, without a friend. They had lost the companionship they needed for this trip of hell and they were terrified to continue alone.

Some people lost every vestige of humanity. Violent incidents broke out for no reason. People were injured and bloodied. Those who were driven by raging thirst pounced on the wounded and licked their blood. Even in my terrible condition I could not accept that, but it was dangerous to try to stop the incidents and the drinking of human blood. People had turned into beasts.

Segal, Steiner, and I took our places near the window again. We zealously guarded it. It was a source of breathable air. We gathered a bit of water from the snow that had accumulated on the windowsill. I was glad there were three of us. We did not have the strength to talk when it was not necessary, but we hugged each other. We made sure

that we each would get some air and "water." It was vital for survival. We worked as a unit, and that infused us with power. We will get through this nightmare. It must end sometime.

After three days without food, you no longer feel hunger, but the exhaustion is painful. Other people wanted our place. At least we had some air and water. We defended it, fortunately without violence. From time to time we let others have the place by the window. No one insisted on keeping it to himself. The extreme cold drove them to huddle inside. We understood that this location was the key to survival.

The most significant challenge was dealing with the uncertainty. I feared what the Germans would do next. They are being defeated. Why are they dragging Jewish forced laborers, exhausted and hunched over, back with them into Germany? Why didn't they eliminate us at Gross Rosen? There was no way that the Allies will stop at the German border and not occupy the country that unleashed this terrible war on the world, to conquer and take over other countries and entire continents. What will they do with us when the Russians and Americans arrive at the outskirts of Berlin, Frankfurt, or Munich?

The train ride became dangerous from above as well. We heard the Allied bombers and we heard right near us, the "carpet-bombs" designed to devastate entire areas. They could also bomb our train. It must be traveling near trains essential to the German war effort. Who knows if the Allies would try to differentiate between them? After we had been through would we be killed by an errant bomb?

As the days wore on, the death rate increased. After four or five days, a dozen died every day. These were people who had undergone systematic starvation and who had been forced to perform slave labor. Their body weight was between 40 and 50 kg. Some of them

longed to fall asleep and not wake up again. They pleaded out loud to be allowed to die in their sleep. We all heard this entreaty. It came from the depths of their soul and was completely genuine. You could not be indifferent to it. They begged to know: "When is it my turn?"

The Doors Open

After seven days and seven nights, the train suddenly began to rumble on non-stop. Were we arriving at our destination? No matter what awaited us there, the main thing was that the doors would open, and we would finally get out of the cars even if it were to enter a concentration camp again. How far had we traveled these seven days? If you had asked me then, I would say not a distance that could sustain a person with two miserable slices of bread. Today, I know we had ridden that revolting train 650 km. Welcome to Dachau.

The war had posed countless challenges. I had to fight with all my strength to stay alive and stay sane. There were countless life or death battles, each of which I had to win. The journey from Gross Rosen, after more than five years of fighting, was the most difficult part of the war. It drained me of my two precious resources: physical strength and, most especially, my inherent optimism.

Dachau's Lethal Water

A ghoulish spectacle unfolded before our eyes when the wheels of the train creaked to a stop. A row of Krupp trucks stood beside the tracks, with the rear facing the train. With chilling German precision, the back of each truck had been placed precisely opposite the doors of the train cars. When the doors opened, the bodies of the dead poured directly into the back of the trucks. Here and there a few spindly corpses fell to the ground. A group of workers picked them up and heaved the bodies onto the trucks.

We were ordered to reach a square some 250 meters distant. We could not walk, and we all fell to the ground. Seven days of hunger has done its work. We were afraid that this would be a good excuse to shoot us all. Yet even after the terrible mortification of the train ride, the pulse of life still beat within me. The only way to reach the square was to drag ourselves on our backsides. And that is what we did. We sat on the ground backwards and pushed our bodies forward with our hands and feet like a swarm of insects all crawling in one direction.

The Germans were not impressed. They had seen this 'performance' every day. We could not help but overhear the comment of the German officer who was watching us: "How is it that so many

Jews got off this train alive?" Oh, we are terribly sorry sir, high officer in the army of the Master Race, sorry for the surprise. There were quality people on the train, people like Siegel, Bondi Steiner, and Shomo Stern. These are men who are a match for any German in anything except evil and racism.

When we reached the square we regained the ability to stand on our feet. Then we heard for the first time that we had arrived at Dachau. I said to myself, "Welcome to another concentration camp. This is my third."

As usual the Germans meticulously recorded us all on a list of names and sent us to the showers. The instructions were that new prisoners must first take a shower. We were terribly thirsty. Since there had been no tables with drinks at the end of the assembly, we anticipated being able to drink some water from the shower taps. To our surprise, veteran prisoners stood on the side of the road and whispered: "Do not drink the water! Do not drink the water!"

"How can I not drink the water?" I thought. "How, after the ordeal we had just been through, could I stop myself?

I had done many foolish things during the war years. Momentary arrogance and pride sometimes had led me astray and I had often paid a price for it. Evidence of that were my cracked teeth. But I knew how to judge unusual situations. I knew that the people who exhorted us with whispers not to drink were telling the truth. Even after seven days of licking only a little ice, I could bring myself to resist. It wasn't easy to watch the flowing running water. I was glad to see that Segal and Steiner also were able to resist.

What we saw in the shower was stupefying. Whoever drank the shower water contracted bloody diarrhea and died within minutes. I do not know if the cause of death was the water being polluted or not. Maybe it had happened because after a long fast you must sip water

slowly and gradually. Whatever the answer, some of the survivors died. It was excruciating to see.

The crowded train car was not the place, and the journey was not the time to get to know other prisoners. Along the way there had been understandable competition among us for survival. Now, however, we had a calm, mutual respect for each other. If you survived the stress and strain of such a nightmare of a journey, you had to be a strong, valuable person. You had courageously made it through a range of torment and torture that only the Nazis could invent. To the outside world we were in tatters, in my eyes, we were all winners.

But I knew that the extermination process was continuing. The Nazi motto was and remained to slaughter every single Jew. If some bastard had so far escaped death, his time would come, too.

We were given clothes and sent to the barracks. Night fell and we tried to fall asleep, but the sleep was restless and chaotic. In the early morning I was awakened with shouts: "Stern! Shomo! Shomo" It was Prince Pauli. Weeping, he told me that his father had died during the night in the block. It seemed that Pauli saw me as someone who was omnipotent. What could I do? I went with him to his block. His father's dead body had already been thrown onto the pile of corpses. We watched together as workers quickly removed the gold crowns from his father's mouth. How could I comfort him?

My Friends Do Not Make the List

For breakfast we received a slice of bread and hot tea. We were instructed to report to the clinic for an examination, but no one paid any attention to us. That was a bad sign. As I waited, I discovered that a group around me had come from Czechia. We chatted in Czech even when a tall man entered the waiting room. He wore tailor-made prisoners' clothing with a red triangle sewed on it, a political prisoner. He heard us speaking Czech and said, "What are you doing here? If you continue to sit here in the clinic, in another two hours you will be dead. How many of you are there?"

"About thirty," we replied.

"Wait," he said, "I'll be right back."

Shortly afterwards, another political prisoner arrived and took down our names and numbers. He made sure everyone on the list was Czech. My Hungarian friends Siegel and Steiner did not make the list. A few more minutes passed, and the first man arrived again, accompanied by a third political prisoner, a short, elderly man. It turned out that the tall one was responsible for the assignments at Dachau. "My friends," he said. "There are but two paths at Dachau: work or death. You were in line for selection. As you can see, most of you would have found yourselves on the path to death. I have

arranged for you to work. It will be tough work, but you will have a chance. Liberation is near. You must hold on."

He continued by saying, "Whoever is sick or weak will be transferred to the 'Block of Pity.' He will wait there to die, without treatment or without being paid any heed. Every morning the dead will be gathered and burned. The flame has not yet been extinguished. This is the deal: you will be permitted this rescue path provided you protect the person assigned to you. He is a Christian and you are Jews. That does not matter, we are all Czech." He looked around him to see that no one else was listening but us and added: "Long live the Free Czech Republic!"

Several things happened all at once: I said goodbye to my two wonderful friends. We hugged, eyes teary, but we did not weep. There was not enough time, and emotional goodbyes were not suitable. We promised to meet after the war as if it were already clear to us that we would come out of it victorious. Next, I was given personal responsibility for an older Czech man named Yazik Jaroslawski. For some reason, the high-level political prisoner chose me to be in charge of Yazik. He turned out to be a pleasant man, very intelligent and he was someone who understood the complex situation inside the camp and was not at all a burden.

In Charge of the Block

Slowly I began to comprehend how the camp functioned. Dachau was the first concentration camp set up by the Nazis in Germany. They opened is gates about two months after coming to power, convinced that they could imprison anyone they did not like.

Unusually for such a camp, Dachau was festooned with colors that embodied the Nazis' morbid cynicism. The colors were seen on the triangles attached to the prisoners' clothing. That way, everyone knew why the regime loathed each one. The Jews, as usual wore the yellow Star of David. Political prisoners, as mentioned before, wore a red triangle. Criminals had green patches, those deemed sociopaths had a black one, and the pink triangle was for homosexuals.

No gas chambers were used at Dachau, only crematoria for the many bodies that accumulated daily. This was one more place that will be a black stain on the German people forever. Towards the end of the war, Dachau was the main supplier of forced labor in the Munich area. The Germans had built munitions factories scattered all over the region. Each morning, convoys of prisoners left for work in the factories. Others spent their nights in small camps built adjacent to large factories. The food was better, compared to Birkenau and Auschwitz. Sleeping conditions were also better, and we were not harassed after we returned from work. The Germans needed good workers.

My energy and concentration levels had not yet gone back to what they were before the Death March. I felt I needed time to recover. Luckily, the others in my block liked me. I also got along very well with the kapo. He and the Germans who commanded us noticed my status among the other prisoners and even offered me to oversee the block. I thought that would be beneficial for me.

I was preoccupied with negative thoughts that did not contribute to morale and chances for survival. I thought ceaselessly about my family. I was distressed by the question of why the Germans and other peoples do to the Jews whatever they want? How did we arrive at this situation? I hoped that taking on responsibility for the block would keep these torturous thoughts at bay.

I organized the work schedules and distribution of the food and made sure to tend to the needs of everyone on the block fairly. Everything was carried out in a democratic manner, with consultation and comradeship. Running a block in the harsh conditions of a concentration camp required me to demand discipline on the one hand and to extend calm, fatherly care on the other. I created a home-like atmosphere, and at the same time made sure that order, cleanliness, and block regulations were adhered to.

Some of the Jewish prisoners had reached their limit of suffering. Maintaining personal and general cleanliness was meaningless to them. It was clear to me that personal hygiene was the most important factor in helping to preserve the lives of the prisoners. Another critical issue was the equal distribution of food. It did not really matter how many grams were in each slice. It was important for people to feel that there was equality and no favoritism. I was glad I was able to succeed in this. The atmosphere was as calm as it could be under the circumstances in Dachau.

All these issues did not exempt me from working like everyone else, but it helped me at the start. I was assigned to hard labor to

build an underground aircraft and missile factory. Its dimensions were enormous, and we could not see how far it stretched. Thousands of prisoners carried bags of cement in a human assembly line, taking them to the mixers, and those who buckled under the weight were thrown to the side. Their fate was sealed. From time to time, I still see this vision in my nightmares. Imagine a vast, dusty, semi-dark cavern, twenty meters underground. Here and there rays of light penetrate through the dust. A sloping curved path leads to cement bags stacked outside, and thousands of people march in a column, like ants, carrying the heavy load. Every now and then someone collapses and is carried out. Who can last week after week doing such onerous work? The answer is simple: no one. But the Jews can, until they die of congested lungs or from sheer exhaustion.

The Kapo did me a great service and got me out of there thanks to my overseeing the block. I was sent to a site where they were drilling water wells. There I befriended the German engineer, who was a water expert. He told me that the Nazis had planned to bring all the Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria to a new camp to be set up near Dachau, for work and extermination using the usual Nazi methods. To do this, the quantity of water in the camp had to be augmented. But General Rommel fell short. He failed to conquer North Africa, and the Jews there survived. Since no order was ever received to stop the drilling, the engineer had continued the work.

I noticed that the Germans on the site were getting excessive amounts of good food. After they finished eating, they passed on what was left to the Jews who worked with them. I did not understand what had contributed to this generosity. Were these different kinds of Germans or was it because the end of the war was approaching. The Allies were intensively bombing the factories. Often the work was stopped, and we were sent to clear the rubble.

The German That Just Wanted to Go Home

Language difference was not a barrier to information circulating by word-of-mouth in the camp. And so, when I was sent out to work with French political prisoners, they identified me as a dentist, and brought in a friend whose mouth was swollen. He writhed in pain, begged, and cried for help. I found some iron wires, bent them into shape and made "dental appliances."

I won't talk about the sterility of the treatment or the quantity of pus that was released. The swelling went down, and the pain subsided within a few hours. The Frenchman breathed a sigh of relief and he and his friends were very thankful.

I was glad I could help a co-worker in trouble. Besides, in the words of Ecclesiastes: "Cast your bread upon the waters, and after many days you will find it again."

In the meantime, the Kapo continued to look out for me and sent me from the water drilling site to work with the water pipes. There were building materials of all kinds there, and our job was to sort them out. We separated the damaged from the usable items, and arranged the pipes by length and diameter. The pipes were made of oven baked clay and were very brittle. With my work partner, a Jew from Thessaloniki, we lifted the pipes in coordination and placed

them down gently in a new location.

It was April 1945. The Allied bombings came daily and they were close. I decided to do my bit for the good side and sabotage the German army by placing the pipes down incorrectly so they would break. It may sound foolish now, but there was rage burning inside me looking for any way out. My Thessaloniki partner cooperated, and we broke as many pipes as possible. It improved both our moods. The war was coming to an end; why not enjoy it a little?

It was a reckless thing to do. On one of the hills was an SS soldier. When he realized what we were doing, he ran down the hill, the bayonet of his rifle pointed straight at me. It was clear that he intended to stab me with the bayonet. I jumped up and prepared to meet him, and the second he was in front of me I grabbed the base of the bayonet and tried to pull the rifle out of the German's hands. He was a big man and older than me. I was skinny and exhausted but determined not to die from a stab wound to my stomach.

The struggle lasted about two minutes. He overpowered me and pushed me to the ground. I landed on my back. Before I could move away he stabbed me in the hip, and feeling he had done his duty, he pulled out the blade, cursed the Jews and walked off. The Thessaloniki had stood to the side all this time.

The other workers gathered around me. This was a new phenomenon that occurred only at the end of the war. A few months earlier, no one had dared to step away from his work. He would be shot immediately. One of the men treated the wound. To stop the blood he created an artery blocker from iron wire and bandaged the wound. The bandage was an empty paper bag of cement, which he wrapped around my leg, tightening it with some rusty iron wire to cover the injury. It was the best possible care I could have received under the circumstances.

I lay on the ground until the end of the work day. On the way back, two friends supported me on either side. The Germans who marched at the head of the line and at the end pretended not to see. They decided it was none of their business. Now all the Thessaloniki, the Germans, and the rest of us thought about was how to survive until the end of the war. I had received a crushing thought in the final minutes: 'My dear Shomo, after five years during which you managed to behave properly almost always, after five years in which the goddess of fortune did not turn away from you, she closed her eyes at the last minute. Maybe you annoyed her. Why did you lose patience at the last minute? You let go of the rage too soon. You forced the aging reservist to stab you. He just wanted to go home in peace, too.

With my remaining strength, I reached the block. My assistant took over as head of the block. I miss you now, dear brother Nandor. Who will find the medications and dressings for my wound? We had no such Nandor in my block. All was lost. How could I survive without antibiotics, my bayonet wound wrapped in dirty paper, bound with iron wire?

I went through a hard night of agitated sleep and frustrated awakenings. I was angry with myself for my arrogance. How many pipes would I have had to break to defeat the Third Reich? What a stupid game I had come up with when the Allied bombers were already above us? Why was I able to be focused and alert most of the time and thoughtless at exactly the wrong moment?

Images of my life flashed through my mind. I wanted to die. In any case, my death was imminent from infection, and I had done the most stupid thing possible to bring it on. The one who received most of my curses that night was the Creator of the Universe, although clearly my situation was not his fault.

In the morning, I showed up as usual for the parade, but I was

barely present. My body wanted to collapse but my discipline held me up half-conscious. But it did not help. The Kapo, the one who had always helped me, pulled me aside. This time he had no way to rescue me from my situation. The German in charge was told of the stab wound, glanced at the dirty, improvised bandage and declared, loud enough for me to hear: "Block of Mercy." It was a death sentence.

Within minutes I found myself on a makeshift stretcher, put on a wagon and taken away.

A Good Place in the "Block of Mercy"

One of the men in charge at the entrance to the block recognized me. "Say," he said as I lay on the wobbling cart. "Aren't you in charge of Block 21? Come with me. I will find a good place for you."

I had begun to think that after my many good connections at Dachau, I was going from bad to worse. I needed a 'Nandor' and a 'Dr. Marton', not a 'good place'. A quick glance around made it clear that I was joining a collection of dying people. Every place had its own set of logic, even if it was not evident at first.

The Block of Pity was twice the size of the regular blocks. It also had three bunks of cramped beds with a track between every two rows. Four people pushed a trolley back and forth on the track, checking on the patients. The bodies of whoever had died and were already cold were loaded on the trolley and sent for cremation. Bodies that were still warm were transferred to the trolley only the next day. The heads of the block thus could receive an extra day of the food meant for these unfortunates.

The person in charge placed me on the middle bunk. Now it was my turn to work out exactly what a 'good place' meant in the Block of Pity. "The Germans sometimes come in and shoot those lying on the lower bunks," he said. "Not good. The upper bunk is too far away

from what is happening. This is also not good. And most importantly, there is a barrel of soup set down on the floor. In our 'convalescent' home, no one is served soup in bed." He said this with the smile of someone who had lost 50 kg of weight. "From the middle bunk you can get down easily to the soup from time to time."

I knew I was at a dead-end. This was my last stop. I was on the edge of the grave. Despite that I said, "thank you." Before the Nazis tried to teach us what we were worth, or were not worth, I had come from the Austro-Hungarian culture that extolled manners and courtesy and I said thank you. And this before I found out how much this man deserved my thanks.

The German's bayonet had not hit bone or the main nerve. After the first three days, I was somehow able to stand. But afterwards the infection got worse and I had a high fever. I was weakened by lack of proper nutrition. My good Czech friend, Yazik, came to visit me every day. He even brought some food, in addition to the soup, the two slices of bread and the cup of tea I received from the 'management' of the 'convalescent home'. Others came, too. Everyone said, "Shomo, hold on. The Americans are 30 miles away. In God's name, persevere!"

"I understand," I replied. "But just how do I do that?"

The days were hard, the nights even worse. All around me heartfelt discussions were taking place. Emotional confessions and heartbreaking farewells were heard. It was a squaring of accounts. They all arose in a hazy cloud of hallucinations of the dying. A babble of languages floated in the air: Ladino, Yiddish, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish.

I lay like that there for two weeks. In the last week, I felt sick to death every moment. I could not think. I watched the movie of my life playing out before my eyes; the same scenes I had witnessed over and over for the past five years. By this time I was already bored with it.

An American Soldier and a German Nurse

Then the occasional shots became systematic. SS men entered the block, began to move from bunk to bunk shooting the inmates lying on the lower bunks. Then they moved to the middle bunk and opened fire from the sides heading toward the center.

Despite their condition, the sick and dying began to flee. Some succeeded and others could not. Racked with hunger and disease, people fell on top of each other in the chaos. Then suddenly the firing stopped.

Eventually we found out what had happened. The Germans had an orderly withdrawal plan that included murdering all the Jews. The camp commander had begun to implement the plan, but his deputy opposed the liquidation. The shootings stopped as the lieutenant's opinion was upheld. When pressed, even the veteran SS did a half-finished job.

I found myself at the bottom of a pile of corpses. I was alive, but I could not move because of the weight of the bodies piled on top of me. I tried with all my remaining strength, but I couldn't get out from under the bleeding corpses.

At some point, someone came to the pile of dead bodies. I do not know to this day what he was looking for in the pile. Maybe he

was after the blankets. Then I heard shouting in a French accent, "Dentiste, dentiste." It was the Frenchman I had helped with the gum abscess. He fled as if he had seen a ghost and I no longer even had the strength to despair.

After a few minutes, the Frenchman returned with a friend. They pulled me out from beneath the mound of the dead and placed me on a blanket. I even remember them taking into account my injured leg and moving me gently. But when we came out of the block, the bombing began. The Frenchmen hurried to take shelter. Quickly, they placed me on a diagonal surface, with my head down, in a trench designed to protect against airstrikes. I do not remember what I thought about the bad luck that had stubbornly refused to let go of me, because I lost consciousness.

After a few days in a deep sleep, I awoke and realized I was in an actual, clean white hospital bed with my leg properly bandaged. I was hooked up to an infusion stand. As my vision became clearer, I saw on the other side of the room a sight I had never seen before: a black soldier, in a US military uniform, together with a blonde nurse, clearly of the Aryan type. The soldier's shirt was completely unbuttoned, displaying an athletic physique. The German nurse's blouse was partially open. I said to myself: "The war is over. Racism has been conquered," and I fell back asleep again.

Epilogue

The war was over, but racism had not been conquered. It exists everywhere, against Jews and others. I hope that these stories of mine will moderate, if only a little, humankind's lust for war and the foolishness of racism.

Dachau was liberated on April 29, 1945. The Americans who entered the camp found me lying in a ditch, on an angle, with my head down, just as the Frenchmen had left me. Someone got me to a nearby German hospital that was now being run by the 45th Division of the 7th Army of the United States. I weighed 43 kg and 200 grams. The road ahead of me would be long, but I was taking it feeling as free as a bird.

Slowly, the members of our family began to gather at the home of my brother Sigmund in Pressburg. There, for the first time we could make an accounting of those who had survived and those who had perished.

At Auschwitz:

My mother Rivka Stern

My sister Tobi, her husband and two children, Leah, and David, who were living in Paris when the war broke out

Israel, my nephew, Sigmund's son

Ilka, my sister-in-law, the wife of my brother Pinchas and their two children, Willie and Naomi

Leah my sister, the youngest in our family

Leah, the wife of my brother Nandor, and their two daughters

And Nandor, our devoted and amazing brother, who was shot by the Germans on the day of the Death March. Just as he had feared, he was killed for knowing too much about what had transpired. My brother Dudi, who was still in the camp and survived, heard two different eye witness versions of how it happened. We will never know how the resourceful Nandor had failed to protect himself at that most critical moment.

All in all, we lost fourteen family members in that abominable place.

Dudi had lain in the hospital in Auschwitz waiting to die. The Russians entered the camp on January 27, 1945. I had said goodbye to him eight days before. He managed to recover and got a ride on a Russian military tanker all the way to Pressburg. Thanks to him not going on the Death March, the war ended for him three months before mine did. When we met again, he was once more the Dudi he had been before the war: outgoing, loving life, a real bon vivant. But he did not manage to get out before the Iron Curtain descended on Eastern Europe. Dudi started a family in Irshava, which was later annexed to the Ukraine. Only in the 1970's was he able to bring his family to Israel.

My brother Pinchas, who was conscripted in the Labor Service before me, managed to escape to Russia and joined a Czech battalion there and fought the Germans. It was called the "Slovoda" Army, named after its commander. When Pinchas returned to Hungary he learned of the death of his wife and children. After some time, he began a new family and moved to Australia.

My brother Sigmund hid with his wife and young son at the house of a Slovak farmer. They returned to their home and clinic in Pressburg and later moved to Israel.

My brother Avraham - Bomi - was taken into the Labor Service in Hungary and by a rare set of circumstances did not end up in Auschwitz. His wife Frieda, who lost their eldest son in the camp, also survived. They reunited after the war and started a family in the United States.

My sister Henya survived the hell of Auschwitz, started a family, and lived in the Czech Republic.

My father, Ben-Zion Yeshayahu Stern, learned of his family's fragmented fate only after the war. He was then 65. He broke down and withdrew into himself. We brought him from the United States to Israel in 1949. He lived in my house in Tel Aviv, sick and sorrowful until he died, six years after the end of the war.

My friends Siegel and Steiner both managed to survive in Dachau. We met after the war. Some of our other comrades from the battalion, those whose names began with the letter 'S' also survived. We all kept in touch, even as our numbers continued to decline.

With these events behind me, I want to fulfill a moral obligation to the six million Jews who were slaughtered. We were no better than they were; we were more fortunate. Revenge offers no solace. The Germans, their allies and those who called themselves neutral did not receive their proper chastisement. If they had, it is possible that racism might have been eradicated. May the memory of all those who were senselessly slaughtered be blessed forever.

I tried to restart my life. When I had somewhat recovered, I came back to my overriding goal of living in Eretz Yisrael. I could not see a future for the Jews in Europe. The continent had spewed us out of its midst. I said to myself: let us wish the Europeans well, but we will

do what needs to be done. We must establish a state for the Jewish people in our historic homeland.

It was not easy. The British, who ruled the land under a mandate given them by the United Nations, blocked entry to the country, chasing down ships filled with Holocaust survivors wishing to reach Eretz Yisrael. They sent these refugees to internment camps in Cyprus, as if Jews had not suffered enough from camps, persecution, and confinement.

I got around the blockade. In 1947, I bought a tourist visa from a soldier in the Free Czech Army, changed the ID photo and entered Eretz Yisrael with the visa. I had previously married Esther, who was my sister-in-law Frieda's sister. We knew each other before the war when I visited Frieda and my brother Bomi. We came from the same background and culture, and we both had experienced the Nazi horrors. Esther had gone through severe hardship during the war but managed to survive in Auschwitz and in the Peterswaldau Women's Labor Camp. We met again after the war in Bratislava. There we were married, and we decided to immigrate to Eretz Yisrael.

My last name, as I have mentioned is Stern. Its origin is German, meaning 'star'. When I arrived in Israel, I changed it to its Hebrew equivalent: Kohavi.

The most exhilarating moment in my life was the birth of our twins, Shimon Haim, and David. I was the happiest of men. During the difficult years I had experienced, I did not foresee that I would be privileged to have a family and raise children. Now, two came at once. I called them 'my two diamonds.'

I felt that I had triumphed, after all.

The State of Israel was established in 1948, the realization of a dream for the Jewish people. I was also able to realize other, personal dreams. I completed my study of dentistry and operated a thriving

clinic in central Tel Aviv until my retirement. I loved my patients and they loved me. I was happy when one of my sons continued in my profession.

I also fulfilled my dream of music and learned at a later age to play the violin. I studied and practiced hard like a youngster and the music soothed my soul and helped me overcome the scarring memories of the war. I had recordings of classical music played in my clinic from the moment it opened until it closed. When my eldest grandson, Ran, reached the age of 7, I went with him to all his violin lessons. Afterwards, I would make him a meal and then we would sit and practice the violin together. It was pure pleasure. To my delight, I was able to enjoy four more grandchildren: Libi, Lia, Noya and Yonatan.

My health is in a delicate state when I tell of these things. The events of the war and the physical and emotional strain affected both my mind and body. My nights are often frightful. Images from the days from the Labor Service and from the concentration camps continue to haunt me. My family is used to hearing me scream in my sleep. I will probably never be free from these nightmares until my dying breath.

Tel Aviv has wonderful beaches. One day, early in the morning I saw a group of people exercising and swimming in the sea. I joined them and learned yoga from them. Since then, every day for the next 30 years you could find me at the beach at six o'clock in the morning. Yoga and swimming have improved my physical condition enormously. Along with music, they have helped me and supported me in my struggle to live a sound, sane life.

The experiences I had can shake the foundations of religious belief. Some of my friends and family have abandoned their faith. Others have been strengthened in their faith and continue to lead devout

Jewish lives. I remain faithful to the promise I made my mother: I put on phylacteries and pray every morning. Respect for her memory is important to me. Her spirit has continued to accompany me all my life. She, who was the pillar of our home, has remained a beacon of light, seen from afar. This light is shined upon our path: religious faith means fair and just treatment for all human beings, whoever and wherever they are.

Shomo (Samuel) Stern
Bratislava 1947



Nandor (Noah) Stern
About 1928



Dudi (David) Stern
Irshava about 1950



Suri (Shara) Neuman
Zhdenijevo about 1940



A document from the Auschwitz camp archives attests to the fact that Shomo was a prisoner at the camp. A number is imprinted on his arm and the profession 'locksmith' also appears.

It further mentions Gross Rosen and Dachau as additional camps where Shomo was imprisoned. The document was prepared by the museum. The source of this document is a compilation of information taken from German records found in the various concentration camps.

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His road leads to the place of nightmares. But will that stop be his last?

Hungary, 1939. Like most Hungarian Jews during the onset of World War II, Shomo Stern is sent to the front lines with the Forced Labor Services – to be worked to death under the thumb of the Nazi war machine. Fighting the bitter Russian winter, the battalions witness horrific events in the wake of the Nazi advance.

Then the rumors start. Rumors of trains packed full of Jews, never to be seen again…

Shomo will not let that be his fate.

While other Forced Labor battalions are decimated, Stern and his comrades survive crippling hunger, blistering cold, and impossible tasks. With nothing but his courage, ingenuity, and no small amount of luck, Shomo fights time and time again for his life and his freedom. But his road ultimately only leads him one way.

He survived the long way to Auschwitz. But can he survive the horrors it hides?

Simon Haim Kohavi was born in Tel Aviv in 1948 to Holocaust survivor parents.

A Long Way to Auschwitz is his first book which combines fascinating descriptions from that turbulent time with the incredible and moving stories of Haim's own father, Shomo.

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