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As Long As I Can Talk

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*As Long As I Can Talk*

The message couldn't have come at a less convenient time. I was in the middle of changes in my life. I was retiring from my job as a psychiatrist. We were selling our house and moving. We were also in the process of building a house on a Caribbean island (hands on). My husband and I were filling boxes and emptying drawers, living in a turmoil of contracts, building permits, mortgages, heartbreaking retirement parties and tearful goodbyes. One day, our fax machine delivered not still another building proposal, but a Hungarian newspaper clipping about an Austrian film-maker who was looking for survivors of the Death Marches through Austria in the spring of 1945.

He was making a documentary film of the event, and complained how hard it was to find witnesses who remembered and who were willing to go back where it happened, and talk about it in front of a camera. These marches of Hungarian Jews at the end of World War II resulted in 80-thousand deaths among the 100-thousand prisoners in the span of six weeks.

In Austria, these events had been a tabu until now; not mentioned in history books, in memorials, in literature or in stone: forgotten by the contemporaries, denied by the guilty, never shared with the younger generation.

This angry man, Michael Zuzanek the film-maker, was going to correct this. He dug out the evidence in years of painstaking work, and was about to present it to his fellow citizens and the world.

"You don't have to do it," said my husband, my children, my friends. "It will be terribly painful and disturbing to you!" Oh, yes, I was sure of that. But I was also sure that I could not miss out on it. I called Vienna, the film makers came to New York to meet me, to see if I could fill the bill. The rapport was instantaneous and permanent. I was accepted, (to play myself in the film), and began to relearn my German.

Three months later I found myself almost half a century back in time. It was April - like THEN - and I was looking at the beautiful scenery of Austrian mountains, rivers, neat villages, and lovely old cities. Everything so familiar! Occasionally my heart began to beat faster - and then came the recollection of an event that had occurred right here. Somehow my heart recognized it before my mind registered it.

In this yard in Rechnitz, a truck had returned with the belongings of two-hundred fellow prisoners, who'd just been shot. On this graceful town square in Bruck a.d. Mur, I remembered how I had watched the citizens hurrying to their dry homes through the pouring rain. We were marching in our dripping clothes toward our nightly accommodations in the puddles of some flooded, muddy field, lying dark under the unrelenting April showers.

On a country road I recalled a glimpse into another world beyond my reach. A girl of about my age, 19, was riding a bicycle in a white dress, with shining, long hair. She was fresh-scrubbed, clean and radiant, while I was covered with mud and lice, in rags, aching all over, and hungry.

The most overwhelming experience was my return to the Erzberg where, on April 7th, 1945, five-hundred of us were killed in 40 minutes' time.

Gudrun Waltenstorfer, the reporter for the film, asked me to explain my recollections of the massacre, my observations, my thoughts, my feelings at the time. When I began my remembering, I was immediately transferred to this terrible Saturday, 2 pm, 48 years ago. Just like in a movie -- flashback.

I heard the uninterrupted gunfire, the curses and commands yelled at us by the guards. I saw the road ahead littered with bleeding bodies and I felt the reluctance to run on the road, jumping over my fellow prisoners, lying there. I felt the terror of imminent death, and it made me a little faint and queasy. I felt the same regrets of wasted time in the past and the same urge to grab any chance to do things better. "I'll be good, if only I could live." I had thought then, and now again. The desperate need and wish to take 20 more breaths also returned, with the knowledge that there will be no time for it anymore.

I finished, and realized that I was talking, answering questions, that there were no guns aimed at me, only a camera, and the people around me were friends. And the road was clear of blood and bodies; only the snow-covered mountain in the background and the silent tall firs on the roadside were the same.

I was exhausted, but also exhilarated. I was very much, very intensely alive. And my life became very precious to me. From the perspective of this ominous mountainside, some of the

worries and upsets of everyday life became unimportant while the basics became extremely valuable. That I can take as many breaths as I need, without counting them. That I have all the chances I want to do things better. That for all those I have lost I have a wonderful family and I am surrounded by love.

And gone was the feeling of guilt that had been nagging me all my adult life, for being a survivor of the Holocaust. Now it was replaced by anger. Anger against the killers. Against those who stood by silently. And mostly against those who say it never happened.

This was not a helpless rage. It filled me with an invigorating sense of energy. This anger was shared by others; we were a team. I met Zvi Bar-Niv, another survivor, who came from Israel to give his testimony and say the Prayer for the Dead over an old mass-grave. I had the chance to hug Maria, the Austrian woman who had helped her mother to cook and distribute food to the ghostlike prisoners camped on their farm. They were aware of the risk they were taking: to be shot. But did it anyway.

My strongest allies were the movie-makers, Michael and Gudrun and their friend Ludwig. They had spent a lot of time and effort digging out the evidence, going through dusty libraries and hidden archives in town-halls. They must have talked to hundred of people, getting some help, but meeting much hostility and disdain.

They could have let well enough alone, and used their talents and energy for more popular topics. It takes a lot of guts on their part to make a documentary like this. To make a statement like this:

"We Austrians were not just innocent victims of the German occupation. Some of us were active participants in terrible crimes. Some of us were heroes. And it is time to think about it."

I was so proud to be part of this team, and so grateful for the opportunity to tell my story. It is also the story of those who didn't make it. Soon survivors of the Holocaust, survivors of the Death Marches, will be an extinct species.

But as long as I live, as long as I breathe, as long as I can talk, I will go on telling the story over and over again.

For those who did not survive.