

SURVIVING THE HOLOCAUST

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April 19, 1999.

This writing is about the Holocaust. It is not intended as a documentary, although the data are all correct and the events accurate. My intention is to reveal my perception of these events, my reaction to the experience and to try to identify the factors, which played role in my survival.

Historical background.

I came from a middle class Jewish family, from a little village in Czechoslovakia on the Hungarian border. When part of Czechoslovakia, including my village was added to Hungary in 1938 (Hitler's gift to the loyal Hungary), we found ourselves in an entirely different world. Life in the prewar Czechoslovakia was fair and free, there was no official anti-semitism. In Hungary, our new homeland, we found ourselves being subjects of national attention, an added burden to Hungary's problems. The government had to amend the existing anti-Jewish laws, regulating the Jews' participation in every aspect of life in Hungary. There were restrictions for schools, public jobs, business etc. For me it meant, that I could not plan for higher education beyond high school and that our family's economic existence became uncertain.

On the other side of the new border, in the new Slovak State the anti-Jewish laws went far beyond the Hungarian restrictions. President Tiso, the leader of the Catholic Slovak Nazi party bragged that his laws were even stricter than the German rulings. My grandparents' and my uncle's belongings were seized, they were moved out of their houses and in 1942 they were deported to a Death Camp in Poland, Auschwitz. Thus the Shadow of the Holocaust had fallen on my family long before we were thrown in it ourselves. A letter smuggled out of the death camp by my grandmother to my mother must have contained horrible descriptions of

their ordeal, because my mother cried for days after she had received it. She told us that my 82 year old grandpa had died still in the crowded freight cart; also that my grandma felt that she will be soon selected to be killed. I didn't want to listen to more details and ran out of the house, crying. When I came back I asked my mother never to show me the letter and never say another word to me about it. I felt I would die if I heard more horrors happening to my grandparents I adored. My mother never talked about them any more in front of me, except telling me that her parents would be happy to know that we were still safe and together and that they wouldn't want their grandchildren's precious young years to be spoiled by worrying and mourning over their grandparents. "You 'll know when you'll have your own children," she said. My parents tried to make my brother's and my life as best as could be. They wanted us to be well educated, to read, to prepare for life after the war is over, to learn foreign languages and so on. My mother in addition instilled in us a very strong belief that life is precious and as long as one is alive, things can change for the better and it is always worth to hold out as long as possible. She had a special ability to find something good in every situation. Although slim and fragile in appearance and easily moved to tears, she was a clear headed and efficient in emergency. To me she was a tower of strength and I could come to her with every trouble or pain or confusion and she comforted me and made me feel safe and loved and hopeful. She had an enormous talent for comforting

and people sought her out with their problems.

During the years between 1938 and 44 we lived within the limited possibilities of Hungarian Jews. My father began to wear black ties in mourning of the Jewish people. We lived in constant worry and in the awareness of a threatening doom. However, our life was still safe and we lived in hope. As the war situation improved, the Germans were losing, our chances for survival till the end of the war-the victory of the Allies seemed more and more realistic. This illusion came to an end when on 3-19-1944 Germany occupied Hungary.

My brother and I were living in Budapest going to school there. We went to the train station two hours after we learned the news about the occupation, but we were not allowed to take the train home because we were Jews. . It was a shock and grief beyond our endurance. In this frightening situation, all we wanted was to be together with our parents. We exchanged letters full of love, anguish and hope and also encouragement and promises that we will survive and meet again "when it is all over." We have never seen our parents alive again. They were deported to Auschwitz in May 1944; the entire countryside was cleared of the Jewish population within two and half months after the German occupation.

My brother and I were staying with our family's friends who were also Jewish. We lived in one of the assigned houses marked with yellow stars, one family per room; we had air raids twice a day and severe

bombings. Most of us were not terribly scared of the bombs: the danger to be killed by the German and Hungarian Nazis was much more serious. We also felt a certain satisfaction at the prospect of German and Hungarian military targets being hit and that, for a change, the Hungarian Nazis were frightened in their shelters.

The deportation of Jews from Budapest occurred in October of 1944, when the leader of the Hungarian Nazi Party, Ferencz Szalasi took over the government. At that time, the Russian army had already crossed the Hungarian border. The trains were needed for military purposes. Therefore, The government found another, inexpensive way to move thousands of people on their own two feet. It began with an announcement ordering every man age 16-60 and woman age 16-40 to report for work at a sport stadium. We were to bring warm clothes, strong shoes and food for 3 days.

The huge crowd of young women had a resemblance of a summer camp gathering as we set out for the march. I felt strong, tough and determined to take any hardship that comes my way.

The awakening came on the first night. We had to walk for several hours to reach our destination, an airport. A steady rain soaked the clothes on our backs and also the contents of our canvas backpacks, multiplying their weight on our shoulders. The heavy mud on our shoes made each step an extra burden. We asked for a rest in vain. We consoled ourselves with the vision of a dry place where we could get a little warm, after arriving to

the airport. We got there late at night and were literally pushed through the gate, walked up some stairs in the dark and found ourselves standing pressed together tightly, but still in the pouring rain. The airport had no roof. We spent the night standing in icy rainwater, which reached to our knees. In the morning, some women just fell down when the room began to empty as we were ordered out. These were the first victims of the deportation. They died during the night and “dropped dead” when the support by other bodies stopped. After this experience, which was just a taste of others and worse yet to come, the goal of our captors was clear to us: they didn’t want us to work. They wanted us dead.

Next day, the march continued. We were chased to the East first to dig anti-tank trenches against the Russian army; when the front approached, we were turned toward Budapest, where we expected (or hoped) to be sent home but it never happened. We were brought to a huge brick factory for the night. This had a roof but no walls, so the November wind had free access. And yet, we should have been grateful because this was the last roof over our heads for a full week. We wandered through Western Hungary for 12 days and our accommodation was very imaginative: we slept on a soccer field, on a village square, in the belly of a freight ship (the guards were spreading rumors of sinking this unwanted cargo) , on a hay market, in a barn where the loft caved in killing tens of prisoners , in pigsties still warm from the pigs, on a freshly ploughed field and so on.

Our final destination was Koszeg, a Hungarian town at the Austrian border. This was one of eight camps on the border whose prisoners had to dig anti-tank trenches to protect Austria from the advancing Russian army. When the Russians reached the border of Austria in March 1945, the German army retreated to Austria; the camps were evacuated, the sick and weak prisoners were killed and the ambulatory ones were marched to Mauthausen in Upper Austria. Our march lasted 17 days (March 28-April 15, 1945). It is hard to tell how many of us arrived there alive, because on the way we were joined by groups from other camps. It is calculated that during the month of April 1945 about 80,000-100,000 Hungarian Jews took part in the death marches; in Mauthausen and Gunskirchen about 40,000 were liberated. How many died after liberation I don't know.

Mauthausen was evacuated after 10 days and we were directed toward Gunskirchen. This camp is almost unknown to the public and its creation shows an incredible arrogance on the part of Germany: they started to build it in March of 1945, 6 weeks before the Unconditional Capitulation.

Gunskirchen camp was located in a dense and swampy pine forest. There were eight huge barracks finished, to house 17,000 people. There was no water in the camp (except for the constant drip from the trees), no latrines, no straw, no bunks. We were lying on top of each other. We didn't get bread here, only one cup of soup a day. This was the camp where the flesh of dead prisoners was carved out and eaten. However, this camp was

also the most glorious one because here we were liberated by the US army on 5/4/1945.

Surviving Against Deadly Odds

Whenever I talk about my Holocaust experience I am asked the same question again and again: how did I manage to survive all the horrors, the starvation, the shootings, the selections, the lice etc, while the overwhelming majority of my fellow prisoners perished. The odds were all against me and death came in so many forms and so often that an individual's chance of survival was negligible. We were liberated in Gunskirchen Death camp on May 4, 1945. People were dying there at a rate of 200 a day and increasing. I think if the US Army came six weeks later, they wouldn't have found a single survivor.

I searched my mind to solve the puzzle that has been a mystery to me too: what helped me to survive? In my previous life as a child and a teenager I was considered to be of rather "delicate" health, fragile, thin and sickly. At school hiking trips I used to be left at home for the concern of my teachers that I will be unable to keep up with my peers. When I returned to Budapest after the war my former classmate told me that everybody agreed, I would be the first one likely to die from the Holocaust ordeal.

When I think back of my general attitude and mental state at the time prior to the deportation, it was dominated by fear and at times panic. I was scared of being killed, of pain, of the SS, of every form of violence and I

was considering suicide if I could only find an easy, painless way to do it. If I just could make myself fall asleep and never wake up, I would have done it. And yet, as I found out during the time of living in immediate proximity of death, in essence I wanted to survive more than anything. I had never realized with what a tremendous force this will for survival had been working in me. I felt an anger of such intensity I had not known I was capable of. I did not want to make the Germans 'work easier for them, and do them a favor by dying. I discovered in myself a ravenous love of life instilled in me by my mother. She could always find things to be happy about even in the hardest times. I had a strong faith that my parents and my brother will survive, because they will do everything within their power to stay alive. I felt an obligation to do my part and be around for the reunion when this was all over. Also, it was my curiosity. I wanted to see what it would be like, with the Germans defeated. I wondered how it would be to start life from scratch. I couldn't imagine life without anti-Jewish laws.

Throughout the death marches and the death camps I was extremely fortunate that I was not alone. My mother's best friend Anna, my surrogate mother in whose house I lived while going to school in Budapest, had to report for "work" with me, being in the age group between 16 and 40. Besides being very practical in hardship situations, she was very supportive whenever my spirits were sagging. Maybe it worked the other way too. In

winter mornings at 3 or 4 AM Apell (head count) calls, I used to cry hopelessly in the bitter cold, my frostbitten toes hurting in my boots. My Aunt Anna used to comfort me: “Don’t cry, baby, when we get home , I ‘ll make hot chocolate for you and serve you breakfast in bed “. And on our way to dig antitank trenches we saw a little dog running out of a farm we passed. It reminded me of Anna’s 12-year-old son. I pointed out this resemblance and told her that the doggie is as well and as cheerful as her son is. After that, we both were looking forward to meet the mutt and when we did, it made our day.

The two of us established a few principles to observe in critical situations: e.g. never volunteer for light work, to be driven anywhere instead of walking, to report for a sick day , to be taken to the hospital. We firmly believed that we had a better chance of survival if we show some usefulness by doing heavy work, carrying heavy stuffs and so on.

One day two trucks drove into our camp. The guards announced that women, who are too weak for digging, would be taken for work in a factory. Also women with bad feet and poor shoes should report for this indoor job. Many of us climbed eagerly on the truck and both trucks were filling up fast. The SS-man looked around at the rest of us. Anna and I were standing close together and the guard motioned to us: “ You two, get on the truck.” I stopped in front of the man, pointed to our hiking boots and told him , in perfect German: “Our shoes are fine. We are strong. We don’t need

light work!” The SS-man looked at our feet and waved his hand: “Na gut (all right), stay !“. Then the trucks drove away. We later learned from the returning guards that the women were taken to Auschwitz .

On another occasion, I got acute appendicitis as diagnosed by my fellow prisoner, a MD. “You should report sick , stay home and put cold compress on your stomach,” he advised. But I was more afraid of the “sick status” than of a burst appendix , so I went to work and tried to pretend working. I got away with both ,the exertion I couldn’t avoid and the poor performance. I did not get peritonitis, nor was I shot. I avoided certain death in the sick tent. There the patients were locked in with no food or water. These tents opened only to take new prisoners in, and move the dead ones out. Nobody left this tent alive. My appendix did not bother me again until I was safely back in Budapest. Then it was removed , at the last moment before perforation.

As time dragged along, everybody developed some kind of “street smart”(or rather camp smart) tricks to cheat death. For instance, almost everything that grew was considered edible : grass, leaves, raw potato peels, mold from bread , slops; I only could not make myself eat live snails as some others did and just very few of us turned to cannibalism. I thought that I myself would not want to go on living after such an experience. Another rule of survival: Always keep a piece of bread until you get another one. I was able to follow this rule for 5 days at the longest. When no new

food arrived, I felt I would die if I went on starving. I became panicky imagining myself to be lying dead of starvation with a slice of uneaten bread in my bag, so I ate it.

To keep from freezing to death, we soon discovered that body heat was the answer. Sleeping outdoors in November or April you had to lie between two other prisoners, pressed together. People lying on the two ends of the row were often found dead in the morning. We finally solved this problem by forming a circle; but that was only possible where the ground was flat, otherwise some people had to lie with their heads lower than their feet.

While in the camps, killing the lice was essential. Each night after work we spent hours inspecting the seams of our clothes and killing lice and nits one by one. It developed into a game. We competed for the highest number killed; it went into hundreds. The little beasts multiplied so fast that if you skipped a single night, the numbers doubled the following day. Skip two nights and you had no strength to get up the next morning because of the loss of blood, which went into the lice's bodies. We had a term for this self-destructive behavior: "He laid himself down on the straw", which meant he had given up, he stopped going to work. That meant half of the food ration and 3 to 5 days until death occurred. During the Death Marches you needed more willpower to stay alive. You had to keep in step, never to lag behind, never to stop or sit down. Each of these could get you killed. I

had to remind myself constantly that I wanted to be the last one to give up; as long as hundreds were still able to walk, so was I.

Besides the acquired general tips for survival, my mind developed several tricks of its own to protect me from giving up. After my unsuccessful attempt to run away, still in Budapest, back in the deported group, beaten and hopeless, sore and soaked, marching over the Danube bridge toward Germany, I suddenly experienced a strange sensation. Many years later, in medical school I identified it as depersonalization. At that time, back in the march, I felt entirely separated from my body, my feelings, my very being. I felt as if I had nothing in common with the girl who was just one of the thousands marching in the rain. I was floating in the air, looking down at this sad downtrodden crowd, dragging itself toward its ominous destination. I felt compassion with this mass, but I didn't feel their pain or the pain of this one girl who was I. By the time we were ushered into a sheltered cellar of a brewery, I was so relieved to be out of the rain, I became of my own self again.

On our way to the West we were subjected to a highway robbery on the least likely place and by the least likely person. A man in the habit of a catholic priest assisted by dignified looking elderly ladies ordered us to line up in the churchyard. All three had large crosses hanging around their necks, but the priest also wore an arrowcross armband (the Hungarian Swastica) and a gun on his shoulder. He ordered us to surrender all our

money , jewelry, arms(including pocketknives) watches, pens, pencils, and drop them in the laundry baskets supplied through courtesy of the two ladies. I put my money in the basket but hid my watch in my underwear; it was my parents' present for my last birthday.

When we were done, the priest made a speech: "This is your donation for the soldiers on the frontier. Now I'll show you what happens to the thieves who cheat and try to hide some valuables." Another man wheeled a wheelbarrow in front of us with a dead body in it, whose face had been beaten to a pulp, literally. The priest told us that he'll give us an opportunity to drop in the basket whatever we might have hidden and he will not punish us. Frightened and humbly, I gave up my precious watch. The ladies then offered us drinking water "to show you we are merciful", they said. This happened at 3 AM. Afterwards we were permitted to continue in our march.

During the long march from Budapest to the Austrian border, our misery grew by each mile. We got food every third day. We drank from puddles in the road. The constant rain was running down our backs, our soaked backpacks weighed a ton. Everybody acquired dysentery and since to stop for relief brought you a shot or blow in the head, we just kept walking, as our body fluids and blood were running down our legs. Our rows did not resemble anything of an organized march. We were ghosts and shadows in rags, moving slowly ahead, leaving clothing, bags, dead

bodies and even children's toys behind.

One day an important event occurred. A diplomatic car with a tiny Swedish flag pulled over next to our rows. A young man (now I know it was Raol Wallenberg) got out and handed us a canvas sack full of papers. He said in German: "My friends, distribute these "Schutzpasses" among yourselves. Use them as you can. Good luck!" These documents were passports declaring that the owner is placed under the protection of the Swedish Kingdom and cannot be deported. In Budapest there were special buildings assigned to house these chosen citizens. We did as told. Anna and I received 2 mother-daughter passes, with names of strangers of the same age as ours. A new energy came into us, lucky ones, owners of these passports to life. We could hardly wait to be able to present them to the authorities. The last few days to the border seemed much easier, despite the epidemic of dysentery, the sore feet and the continuous November rain. My fantasy was running wild with visions of a hot bath and a clean sheet in a bed, in a sheltered house under the royal protection.

Finally we, lucky owners of those precious papers were standing in line facing the committee of six uniformed men, all wearing arrowcross armbands, the sign of the Hungarian Nazi party. Through the open door we could see trucks with Red Cross signs, apparently waiting to take us back to safety. When I handed our papers to them, I could feel palpitation and shaking all over while they were examining them. And then it happened. A

wall of bricks came crashing down on me. They tore both passes into shreds, with the words: "These are not valid. They were issued after October 15". It was all over. The trucks left with just a few winners, while the great majority was ordered to continue to march toward the dreaded border. First I was in shock; I moved with the crowd automatically, in a daze. Then I realized the impact of it: we were leaving the country, we were on our way to destruction. Does it make any sense to fight, to put so much painful effort into step after step, which will only bring us, closer to our inevitable death? Why not just sit down on the roadside, accept a shot and be free from all that's hurting? I was looking around to find a suitable spot to rest, when, for the first time in my life, I heard a voice. I did not know back then about hallucinations. I was convinced that it was my mother talking to me. She said: "My poor little heart, don't give up. You'll survive and when you will be talking about it to your children and friends, this horrible ordeal will be just an episode in your life when you were twenty". I didn't know then that my mother had been long dead, killed in Auschwitz 6 months earlier. I calmed down: my mother had never lied to me. I became almost elated. I told Anna not to worry: we'll be all right. I treasured this experience and I replayed the message in my mind every time I came to a low point.

As time went by, my state of mind was gradually changing and I became a different person in the process. Somehow I lost the human values

I had been taught while growing up in a decent, loving, cultured family. After a 3-4 months of camp life there were very few rules of decency, morality or civilization I wouldn't break (at least in my mind) for survival. My limits were: not to steal from a fellow prisoner and not to eat human flesh. But I had no second thoughts about stealing apples from a shed by the road, of squatting and relieving myself or stripping to wash anywhere I had the chance or to take a blanket from a dead body. During those months of deportation, I got so used to the scenery and the hardship of daily life that I became oblivious to the smell of burning old clothes, the sight of dead bodies lying everywhere, the live prisoners whose faces lost all personal features and looked alike, just as skeletons look alike. This was all just background: it did not evoke more emotion, than what I feel today while pushing my cart through the aisle in the supermarket. On rare occasions I got a jolt of awareness that this is not quite right and that there is another world somewhere. This occurred only when I got a glimpse into this other world.

It was Easter Sunday. The sun had just come up and we were holding our steaming blankets over smoking, dying little campfires. We were all wet, muddy and filthy. The Easter bells were ringing in the village nearby. Then I saw a girl on the bicycle. She was about my age and she looked strikingly clean. Her shiny long hair, her crisp white dress and polished shoes, her sparkling bicycle, the flowers in her basket, everything

looked freshly scrubbed, fragrant and radiant on her. I became intensely aware of the army of lice crawling on my skin and while she passed by with horror on her face, an absurd idea struck me: somewhere, in another life, I looked not unlike this girl, riding my beloved bicycle.

Another encounter with a fellow prisoner: she was given a bowl of rice by a German soldier, during our rest on the roadside. I was watching her spoon traveling between the bowl and her mouth. I fantasized of her dropping dead so I could finish what's left in the bowl. I watched the disappearing remnants of the rice and felt a deep despair because the girl didn't die and the bowl was empty.

During an air raid Mauthausen camp was bombed. We were ordered out of our tents and were watching the fireworks in the great outdoors, as body parts and whole bodies were flying in the air. There were explosions, fire, screams, the very earth was shaking under us. I did not feel any fear for my own life: my only worry was the safety of the building where our food supply was kept.

In Mauthausen, we lived in huge tents for 200 people, packed with six times this number; no work, no water, no straw, no latrines, no Appells. Two daily routines: the morning inspections and the food. The inspection was done by an SS-man wielding a club, which he used randomly hitting prisoners on the head, while walking through the narrow aisles. The food was brought by the kapo's (Kamarad Polizei) : usually Polish prisoners who

were 6 years veterans of the death camp life, the survivors of hell, which made them ruthless and cruel. They brought us soup but only after they had fished out the solid parts like potatoes and vegetables, leaving just the salty water, they only brought half of the bread (one loaf for twenty people instead of ten) . Their loot was traded for cigarettes and services from prisoners outside the tent camp. (The non-Jewish prisoners were kept in wooden barracks, with electricity and running water; we called them the palace). This daily sustenance arrived any time of the day, so our only activity was to watch the entrance and wait for the glorious moment. I tried to force myself to THINK. Some people were talking of food, endlessly, while others screamed at them to stop, in vain. Men and women recited recipes in great details ; this was disturbing to me, because I was unable to recall any of those delicious, fancy dishes, all I could remember was bread, potatoes, milk and apples. I wondered why back then we never had eaten such delicacies like raw potato peels with salt, a treat I tasted and enjoyed here. I was trying to occupy my mind with thoughts other than food and found it impossible. I was unable to recall a single rhyme or tune; I could not remember any plot of a book, theater or movie. In my mind I searched for my mother to complain to her and I couldn't see her face. I did not remember what she looked like! I tried desperately to picture our home with my family in it and all I could see my mothers hand holding a big spoon dishing out soup into my bowl. I could see each piece of meat, vegetable

and noodle, I could see the rising steam, but not the faces of my parents and my brother around the table.

Our meal arrived .It was grayish, dirty water clouded with a few grains of farina .It was lukewarm, however my only complaint was that there was so little of it: just half of the bowl. But the bread was marbled with bright green mold, which was good news. There were still finicky people among us who picked out molds to throw them out and I was there with my dish to beg for the green crumbs. Sometimes, I collected a cupful of this delicacy and then Anna and I ate it slowly, savoring every bit of it. It probably was a lifesaver too: besides some calories it probably supplied us with penicillin.

During the long winter of 1944/45 we stayed in one place, in a camp on the Hungarian side of the Austrian border, next to a little town named Koszeg. We stayed there four months. We were digging anti-tank trenches in frozen ground, not very effectively. The Germans must have concluded that the women were useless for this job and they arranged frequent “selections for light work” Those selected were shipped directly to the extermination camp in Auschwitz. Of course, at that time, we did not know that.

Finally, the rest of us women only filled up 2 of the 50 cardboard tents in the camp. The rest were for men. The tents were set up in rows. After dark nobody was allowed to leave them except for latrines. We had to call out to the guards: “Guard small bathroom (No1) or big bathroom (No 2)” which meant either to step out next to your tent or to the far-away latrine. I am

still amazed at the courage and dedication by one newsman (K. Havas Geza) who defied the curfew and made his daily rounds with the news from the war front. His hands were crippled from frostbite so he couldn't open the doors : he only knocked. He stood in each tent for a minute and reported the latest position of the retreating German army. Everybody expected his visit with excitement. It was the highlight of the day. He brought us hope, the chief ingredient in the recipe for survival. In rain and snow and ice and wind, he never skipped his visit. Each day he put his life in mortal danger every time he stepped out of a tent without alerting the guard. He survived the night walks but he was later killed in the Eisenerz massacre on April 7,1945.

On this Saturday , April 7,1945, on day 10th of the Death march, we got a hearty meal, soup and bread. Then we had to climb up a steep road into the mountains. As we got closer to the top, we heard louder and louder shots.

The road continued downward and behind a bend we saw the guards on both sides of the road, their guns trained at us and shooting in our rows. The road was littered with dead and wounded bodies, bags and clothes and the mud was shiny and red from blood. The guards yelled:" rush, rush, Jewish pigs!". They were everywhere, on both sides and in front of us. This was not aimed at anyone in particular, but at all of us. We all understood what was happening: the Russian army was close and so were

the Americans. Stuck between two fronts, the Germans didn't want this burden to carry along. There was no need for us, no work, no food, no shelter. This was a deserted place with no witnesses and no route of escape. The food at the bottom was the fuel to carry us up to this perfect spot for execution.

Although this was clear to us, everybody's actions were still governed by an animal instinct for survival. Why did nobody try to run off the road on the steep slope? Or just sit down instead of jumping over the bodies, stumbling and slipping? Instead, we kept running in one mass, pressed tightly together, anxious not to draw attention to ourselves. It was snowing slightly and suddenly the sun appeared for a few seconds and there was an audible collective sigh. I thought(as did apparently the others): "The sun is shining, but not for me!" People around me were dropping like flies. Some screamed, others prayed aloud. I screamed: "Mommy, don't let them do this!" I thought of the piece of bread I had saved in vain; I promised: "I'll be good, I'll be so good!" I thought of the sea I will never see and I thought that I did not know how one dies, as if going for a test unprepared. And suddenly I just wanted enough time to take twenty breaths. I thought of the zillions of breath I had taken in twenty years without paying attention to it . Now, I was begging just for twenty more. The shooting lasted 40 minutes. 500 people were killed. The rest of us, about 200 arrived in the valley on their own feet. We were ordered to stop and stand at attention,

not to move, not to talk. The guards were walking around us, saying: "It's not dark yet". But no more shooting occurred. Taking a great risk, I fished out my bread and ate it secretly, crumb by crumb. Two hours later we were marched into a camp with barracks. Finally, I dared to whisper to Anna: "Do you think they'll let us live?"

Let me jump ahead by twenty years. I visited this spot again with my brother and my children, age 13 and 8. I recognized the scenery, the tall pine trees and the snow-covered mountaintops in the background. We were looking for some sign, some memorial to the 500 people killed here, but we only found a poster announcing a Circus coming to town. In the valley we stopped to buy postcards of Eisenerz. The friendly shopkeeper inquired whether this was our first trip to this picturesque area. I told him about my previous visit here back then and he nodded gravely: "Yes, I remember it. The prisoners were fed on the bottom of the hill". I told him what happened on our way to the valley. No longer friendly, his face turned from pink to deep red: "This is a damn lie! Nobody was killed here. Maybe one or two if they tried to run away. Maybe in Mauthausen. But never in Eisenerz. Don't do communistic propaganda in my shop!" I ran charging towards him and if my brother hadn't stopped me I would have killed him with my bare hands. But my brother half carried me out in his arms, comforting me: "He is not worth it. Come, don't even look at him". I cried and let him and the children comfort me. We all understood now why there was no memorial

on the road.

This story came to a better ending in the spring of 1993. I participated in a documentary movie about the Death Marches in Austria, made by a talented producer Michael Zuzanek. Again I was standing on the same mountain road; this time, no guns were directed at me, only a camera and I had the chance to tell the story of the Eisenerz massacre for the whole world to hear. As a result of the film "Alles schweigen"(All be silent), memorial monuments were raised at several locations in Austria, including this spot in Eisenerz, where my admired newsman and 500 other innocent men and women were killed.

Another hero from Koszeg was a young physician whose last name I don't remember. Everybody called him Laci. One frosty morning the guards were chasing people out for "Appel". Laci had set up a makeshift operation table in his tent and was removing a gangrenous leg of a fellow prisoner. The guard ordered him out for Appel. He answered:" I can't stop now. He is bleeding too much. " The guard said, playfully: "I give you a choice. You go to Appell now and I let you live. Or, you can finish the surgery and I shoot you.". The doctor didn't even look up. He finished his work, dressed the wound. The guard watched him patiently and when he was done, he raised his gun and shot Laci in the head. This incident confirmed my belief that physicians share a secret that renders them strong, invincible and fearless. I had seen many times during the death marches that when we

arrived at our nightly camps and all of us common folks started looking for the best place to sleep, collect firewood to dry our soaked blankets or were just sitting and resting our aching feet, the doctors were setting up makeshift tents with a Red Cross sign offering treatment on demand. They arrived at the spot after the same painful march as the rest of us. They even had to carry their doctor's bags besides their personal belongings. Where did they get the extra energy and motivation to place their patients needs ahead of their own? I decided that if I survive, I would become a doctor myself. Of course, at that time, the probability of that to happen was next to zero, so I was not exactly preoccupied with the idea. My mind was busy with more mundane thoughts of daily survival, one painful hour at a time.

Staying on the topic I have to jump ahead of my story once again: I survived and arrived home to Budapest in August 1945. I found my 16 years old brother alive and learned about the disastrous end of my parents, grandparents and other relatives; we had no home, no property, no means of living. My brother was a high school student. I was looking for a job to support us both. One day my brother presented me with a medical student registration card in my name. He enrolled me secretly. "Everybody can be admitted now, Jewish or not. You would be a fool, not to study. Don't worry, we'll make it." It wasn't easy but five years later I graduated as an M.D.

Have I learned the secret I was after? Maybe, a little part of it. I

learned self- discipline, patience, compassion and humility. I have been a physician for 48 years and never regretted it.

The day of our liberation started as any other day. The SS-men were marching between the barracks, knocking down prisoners who got in their way. The noise of the far away explosions sounded nearer. The SS suddenly ordered everybody into the barracks. Soon rumors began to spread that the SS are leaving the camp. Somebody saw a white sheet at the main building. Finally, one by one we dared to sneak out of the barracks. We saw no guards anywhere. Nobody knew what to do. Most of the prisoners remained lying on the floor, too weak to move. Others were gripped by a feverish activity: they hunted for the SS-men. They broke into the food store. Some just went plain crazy, danced and sang and cuddled imaginary babies in their arms. One of our barracks caught fire.

Anna was talking about the future but I was unable to follow it. I was scared stiff. Freedom was frightening. I had no idea how to do anything without being ordered to do it. Where to get food when not even the 4oz of bread will be given to me? How are we getting home? And, the scariest thought of all: what will we find at home? Who will we find alive? I knew I should be happy, this should be the happiest day of my life: I survived against all odds, I survived. But I have forgotten how to be happy.

Next morning everybody capable of walking set out to the main road to meet our liberators. Walking through the unguarded gate seemed unreal

to me. The dirt road toward the highway was littered with dead prisoners, lying on their stomachs in crawling positions. These people have also passed through the gates as free men. They had survived.....

On the main road we finally saw the colony of US jeeps, the soldiers waving the V-signs and throwing packages of cigarettes and chocolate bars at us. Our ghostlike appearance was reflected in the horror in their faces when they looked at us.

A few hours later we found an open German Army storehouse. A new nightmare started. An enormous hall, full of canned food, sugar, macaroni, invaded by hundreds of starving, half-crazy people. They dug their heads deep in the sugar hill until they suffocated. They pushed more and more food into their mouth: gagged, choked, doubled up in pain and died. More and more people entered. The only exit was blocked by pouring in of new crowds. I held my loot tightly to my body and would have rather died than let them be taken away from me. I don't remember how I succeeded in crawling out from beneath the heavy, wild and blind feet. I sustained a few blue marks, but I was whole, alive.

Soon thereafter, I was admitted to a makeshift military hospital. First I was accusing my friends of having hidden my mother's letters. I stated that she had written to me, that my whole family was at home already, they were just waiting for me. All our vases were full of lilacs and they wilt so fast.... I had to get home with the first train....I cried and complained and

they called an ambulance. The Army doctor found I had a temperature of 106 F and said I had typhus. I screamed and kicked at him. I knew he was lying just to scare me. Typhus meant death and I was not going to die, not now after surviving the camp.

I was driven to the hospital by the US medics, I was turned away by the Nun-nurse: they had no beds for females. I was puzzled and tried desperately to make sense of this statement: I forgot what was the difference between the sexes. She could have just as well said, they couldn't take me because the walls were painted blue. By the way, the nun took pity on me and offered to give me a bath before they took me to another hospital for women. Two nuns put me in a tub of delicious warm water, holding me and washing me like a baby, while commiserating over my emaciated body covered with wounds: "Oh, you poor child! Am I hurting you with the sponge? Skin and bones, skin and bones." I started to feel sorry for myself and began to cry. Somebody was showing compassion and pity for me: this was a long forgotten experience. The guards had been threatening and cruel, the outsiders indifferent and the fellow prisoners-like myself-too absorbed in their own pain to spare feelings for each other.

In the hospital, where Anna joined me with the typhus we both were very near death. Miraculously, we both survived. We got the best care the US army had to offer. We were released to a camp for displaced persons

and waited for an organized transport home. There were negotiations going on how to transfer the liberated masses from the US zone to the Soviet-controlled territory.

After 3 months of waiting the Russians marched into our camp. We welcomed them as our new liberators: they promised us to take us home. The next day the commander asked us politely whether we could walk 12 km to the train which will take us to Budapest. Most of us agreed with great enthusiasm and in one hour we were on our way, this time to the East. There were no trains, not that day and the next. We kept walking, again without food or shelter but comforted by the direction: each step brought us closer home. A disturbing occurrence was that the Russian soldiers were shooting at us when we tried to grab some potatoes from the fields that belonged to the Austrian farmers. We were all treated again as prisoners. After 12 days of marching we reached St. Polten where our direction was suddenly reversed. The order was: 50 km to the West, to the train. Some people simply refused to turn and started to move eastward. They were shot by the soldiers. While marching next to a dense and tall cornfield, Anna and two of my friends and I just took off and ran into the cornfield, luckily unnoticed. After the marchers passed, we got to St. Polten and by train through Vienna arrived in Budapest on August 18, 1945.

Several years later I found out that our transport finally got into the train which took them in locked cars through Hungary all the way to the

Siberian camps. A few survivors returned home in 1947. The rest disappeared.

On our arrival, we learned that my brother survived and also Anna's son survived. My brother was referred to as "the poor child with no parents" and I chose not to hear this comment and selected to hear: "no parents at home". I didn't ask questions about them. When I met my brother, we clung to each other and couldn't stop crying. He told me about his clever survival in this city raided by bombs and tanks and Arrowcross thugs, his miraculous escape each time he was caught with his fake documents. He survived without money, without friends or relatives, all alone. When the city was freed from the Germans and the war was over, my brother went home to Nagyszollos to inquire about our parents. He was not even let in our house by the new occupants. He wasn't allowed to bring a souvenir, a photograph or a letter, anything. He took a fistful of dirt from our mother's garden and brought it back in a handkerchief. Our town belonged now to the Soviet Union.

We were still talking about our parents as if we were expecting them any day. We even went to the train station to look for them among the returning deportees. Then, several weeks after my return somebody mentioned my parents as being killed in Auschwitz, I could no longer deny it. I wanted to cry, because that's what you do when you hear such terrible news. But the tears didn't come. I felt empty-the self-deception was taken

away and I had nothing left. I couldn't cry, because I had known it for a long, long time that my parents were dead. At that time in post war Budapest, living in a shelter for returned deportees, I was unable to mourn. All of us had lost their families. The enormity of the tragedy was too much for anyone to bear. There was a collective denial among us-we silently agreed not to talk about our dead.

We were feverishly building a New World and our own new lives. I didn't mourn my parents then. I have been mourning them all my life. In a way, they are still alive in my thoughts and my actions.

My life after the Holocaust has turned out well beyond expectation. I became a MD. I have been happily married for 48 years. I have two children, four grandchildren and a crowd of extended family. My brother and I are closer than ever. My children are the main source of my pride and happiness.

I still have some habits that originated in the Holocaust.

I have trouble throwing out food.

I don't take simple pleasures for granted, I savor them.

Whenever I take a shower I am delighted that it's warm water running down my body instead of the October rain. Whenever I am out in the street on a cold, rainy, windy day I get elated because I know that soon I will be in a dry, warm and safe place.

We have a house on the shore of the bluest, warmest see there is.

To this day, whenever something bad happens to me I find myself counting my breaths. With each breath I take, hope spreads inside me and the knowledge that as long as I can breathe I have all the chance in the world.