

STRAFING AND LIBERATION

For days now the entire camp was buzzing with rumors: the Russians were besieging Vienna; Ulm has fallen; the British would be here soon and we would be liberated and then we could return home. But home where? And to whom? And what for?

My God, within a day or two it will be a year since it all began!

I said the entire camp was alive with rumors, but actually it was only those few of us who still cared about what was going on and who still hoped that one day we would be out alive of the concentration camp. Like the dozen or so boys my own age, around 18-19, peeling potatoes in the camp kitchen, a position of great privilege, because you could some time eat half a potato, raw, or better still, stick a few big potatoes under your belt and smuggle them out in the evening when the work was over and with some luck not be caught in the random frisking, and then maybe sell them to some of the other more fortunate inmates for a few slices of bread, or maybe support a brother or father, or a dying cousin like the one I had next to me in the hut.

Most of the three or four hundred other men in the camp were lethargic: perhaps they haven't given up altogether the hope to survive, but we have been hoping in vain and disappointed too many times. First, way back in Hungary, a year ago, when the Russians reached the border, but stopped there and then came the German occupation, and the yellow star, and then arrest, and then the train to Auschwitz. Then a few months later the Allies landed in Europe and we thought or hoped they would be here in a few weeks and let us out. But they didn't. Then again the Russians who reached Praga, a suburb of Warsaw – the few Poles among us were galvanized by the news: they knew where Praga was – but again, the Russians stopped there and for us nothing changed.

When I speak of news, I mean the grapevine. There were no newspapers coming into the camp and, of course, no radios. But earlier, months ago, when we were still able-bodied and working outside the camp, on the giant construction site among giant shovels and the narrow-gauge trains carrying the dirt, and the concrete mixers, and, of course, thousands of slaves like ourselves shoveling the dirt and carrying the sacks of cement and pushing the railroad cars where the engine couldn't go and felling the trees in the forest where the Germans were building giant underground assembly halls – as we learned much later, for assembling their V-weapons, the rockets – you had a chance to learn what was going on “outside.” From a page of a newspaper discarded by a German foreman, or supervisor, or a guard, and sometimes directly from a supervisor who was friendly and who would talk to you during a break, like Wilhelm, the big whorehouse bouncer from Hamburg, a former Social Democrat, who got home leave late last year and never returned. It was also rumored that the French prisoners, most of them from North Africa, who didn't mingle with us Eastern Jews and

who did talk to the guard, had a secret radio receiver. Anyhow, we knew, or rather hoped, that the end was near.

There were other signs, too. Over the last weeks we could see the huge swarms of bombers glistening in the sunlight fly by high up and once even bombing some town a dozen miles away: we could hear the explosions and see clearly the traces of the bombs. And there were no more flights of those strange twin-engine German planes with a whine instead of the drone of the engines and when you looked up to where the whine came from the plane was already half a mile ahead of the sound. (As I learned much later, these were the Messerschmitt 262 jet fighters of which nobody ever heard before, and these were experimental flights; we were just twenty miles south of the big German air base of *Kloster Lechfeld* defending Munich, which must have attracted the ever-more frequent low-flying Allied fighters usually chasing even lower-flying Germans or vice-versa. One of them even fired a burst at the camp, without hurting anyone, or was he firing at a German plane and we got part of the burst? Anyhow, you couldn't see many German aircraft any more.

For the last day or two there was also a distant rumble that everybody would recognize, especially those who fought in the first World War, as the sound of cannon.

From what I have written so far, you can gather that this was no summer camp for boy scouts. It wasn't even summer: it was spring, late April 1945 and it was Camp Number Four or *Lager Vier*, a smallish concentration camp, well hidden in the surrounding pine forests except for the railroad line that passed almost directly behind us. The three or four hundred emaciated prisoners who were inside, were survivors of the great winter epidemic of typhus fever that cut down our numbers from maybe a thousand or so, of last December when I arrived there and of several hundreds of later arrivals. And of starvation, too: we didn't get much to eat, either, but we didn't have to work except the privileged few who, like myself, worked at the camp kitchen. Or those who were in the disposal *Kommandos* who picked up the dead in the barracks every morning, loaded them on their cart and dragged them to a barrack called "the morgue" from which they were hauled away to the mass graves a few miles away. Rumor said: some times mutilated by the Russian prisoners of war whose instincts of survival were stronger than the taboo against cannibalism.

Also, we were survivors of a fate worse than starvation. This was *Krankenlager* or "hospital camp" in which were dumped the sick, and the hopelessly weakened, or those who have suffered some accident on the work site and could no longer recover to work again like myself. (I can still remember when during the night shift I stepped on a plank with a big rusty nail protruding and it went clear through the worn sole of my shoe and through my foot and came out on top of the shoe and what a sensation it was to lift my foot and the plank came with it and to pull the plank and nail out of my foot! And the look on the face of the others who felt, like I did then, that this was the end. But it wasn't.)

Our hospital camp was started some five months ago to rid the nearby for or five other camps, satellites of Dachau that supplied the slaves for the big construction site, of the sick and the lame. Not that those camps held on to their disabled slaves before: there was a *Krankentransport*, a transport of the sick every month which was allegedly going to an *Erholungslager*, a “convalescent camp” and it emptied each camp’s primitive infirmary and many exhausted inmates volunteered for the transport even though they might have had a dark foreboding that there couldn’t be anything like a convalescent camp for worn-out prisoners worked to near-death. Still, it couldn’t be any worse than being a slave working fourteen hours, six-and-a-half days a week on below-subsistence rations, unprotected from the elements, beaten, in the shoes that no longer protected your feet.

As I learned much later, those earlier transports of the sick went straight to the Auschwitz crematoria. I barely escaped one of these transports a month earlier, but that’s another story.

After the Russians took Auschwitz, or was it Himmler who wanted to accumulate brownie points with the Allies, -- anyhow the SS converted one of the older, largely depopulated camps, into a “hospital camp” and I was one of a group of maybe 30-40 prisoners who were marched from another camp in early December 1944. I remember the date: it was the 3rd, the birthday of my younger brother who I lost sight of when we arrived in Auschwitz in May that same year.)

The hospital camp had no hospital: it was just thirty or forty barracks, or more precisely, long troughs excavated in the ground and a roof of planks and tar paper and inside the inmates could lie on the straw.” But, as we discovered upon arrival, no work, no reveille at 4:00 A.M. every morning, no beatings, no march to work. Not much food, either, but then you could rest, blissfully rest, and anyhow, you could often eat the rations of those who died, or were about to die and were too sick to eat. And when your turn came to be very sick, as it happened during the great epidemic of typhus fever, you didn’t eat much, either. You didn’t wash often, mostly because there was no water in the barrack and it was winter outside and much too cold to go to the washing area: open-air troughs with the taps of water over them. We were so covered with lice that washing wouldn’t have made a difference.

Well, I have given you the background, now let’s get the story moving.

It was moving fast enough: it all happened in just a few days. The first event in the sequence was when one afternoon I became suddenly unemployed. Kurt, the deputy cook – also an inmate, but of the camp aristocracy, a bug burly Viennese, full of practical jokes which he used to play on us potato peelers, -- caught me with four or five potatoes under my belt, literally, not in my belly. It did not take much frisking to find the potatoes on a body of a

hundred pounds, which is what I must have been weighing. It must have been one of the fellow potato peelers who fingered me: everyone was pilfering potatoes, but I was not part of their group; I was an outsider. They all came from the same subculture of Jewish proletariat in the Carpatho-Ukraine, they all spoke Yiddish which I didn't, and worse still, I came from the hated "Mameland" -- the derogatory term used for pre-war Hungary -- that broke up their normal way of life when it invaded Czechoslovakia where they were equal citizens. I came from the country that oppressed them and finally handed them over to the Germans for annihilation. So, in their minds, I was guilty by association.

Whoever did it, maybe didn't do it out of any particular malice, he probably wanted a starving brother or friend get the job, the same way that another friend and protector got me the job a few weeks earlier.

So I was caught red handed, received two tremendous slaps in the face and in another moment was out of the kitchen. It all happened in less than a minute: I was out, no more potatoes, and my God, from now on I too was going to starve. Fear gripped me and despair; what will I do now? What will happen to my cousin whom I can no longer help. And the shame: I let down my benefactor, one of the camp doctors who helped and bribed the kitchen aristocracy to accept me as a potato peeler!

I need not have worried all that much...

I don't remember to have slept much that night. Next morning there was a strange tension everywhere, all over the camp, somehow even the most lethargic prisoners came alive. The rumor mill had that Vienna has fallen and that Hitler would speak later that day. And so it happened.

Around noon the loudspeaker in the middle of the *Appelplatz*, the parade ground in the center of the camp, silent for months, started crackling, blaring marches and then came the harangue, in German. I don't recall how long it lasted. It was not the familiar, hateful voice of the Fuhrer that I have heard on the radio so many times.. Several of us crawled outside the barracks to listen; I didn't understand most of it, but I got the final sentence all right, the famous: *Berlin bleibt deutsch, Wien wird wieder deutsch* (Berlin will stay German, Vienna will be German again). And the rumble of distant cannon continued and became louder. It was a day of brilliant, spring sunshine.

The next morning our *Blockaltester* (the chief of the barrack, a Frenchman) was called to the *Appelplatz* together with all the internal camp aristocracy, cooks, internal police, *Kapos*, the chief inmate, doctors, scribes, and everyone above the rank of a *Musulman*, the term for the common inmate. He came back very agitated, told us the camp will be evacuated, packed his scant belongings and disappeared. On the *Appelplatz* they were all lined up and marched off under escort destination unknown and were not heard of again. The camp remained headless,

doctorless, no daily meal, nothing. I still don't know why no one even thought of ransacking the kitchen stores: maybe we were too weak, or apathetic, or afraid of being shot. The watch towers were still manned.

Towards evening the loudspeaker started crackling, repeating over and over again: "Everybody leave the camp through the southeastern corner; take your blanket with you! Only those unable to move should stay behind."

I packed my belongings which consisted exactly of one spoon, one bowl, and two gray, thin, filthy, nit-infested wood-fiber blankets: the one I slept on top of the straw and the one to cover myself. I told my cousin Ivan that we should leave. He couldn't get up: he was in the final stage of tuberculosis and I knew he would soon die. He was too weak and crying: "don't leave,, don't leave me, what will become of me!"

A childhood friend and former classmate of his came into our barrack and said he will stay with Ivan. I left, burning with shame that I wouldn't stay, but I was panicky, afraid of getting killed if I stayed. There weren't many inmates left inside.

It was already dark outside. Here and there I could see a few skeleton-like silhouettes like myself, all going in the same direction: at one of the corners of the camp the 8 foot-tall double fence of barbed wire has been cut through and an unending procession of prisoners were walking, limping, or crawling out, some supported or dragged by the others. There were a few older guards scattered on both sides of the sorry procession, some with torch lights. The younger guards, the real SS, must have left with the column of the camp aristocracy that same afternoon. I can distinctly remember that, so unlike other marches, none of the guards beat or even insulted us. It was cold, but not terribly and it started to drizzle.

We were herded towards a clearing, maybe half a mile from the camp, next to the railroad line and told to wait there. I teamed up with another inmate my age whom I thought I met before. He was just as unsure of what was going to happen and just as much afraid as I was. Anyhow, it was a good sign that the guards did not rush us, didn't line us up, didn't make us dig (which would have been a clear sign that we were to be shot), just surrounded us and pretty much left us to our own devices. Anyhow, for the many emaciated half-skeletons it would have been impossible to flee: where to? We would have been recognized from a mile away and the summary punishment for attempted escape was death.

After a while, we decided there wasn't anything we could do, so let's try to sleep. Strangely, I didn't even feel cold. At the edge of the woods we scraped together a small fleck of pine needles from the trees, and each of us wrapped ourselves in our miserable blankets and slept.

I woke in the early dawn from the cold, with my blanket thoroughly soaked through, wet and shivering. It was not long before we heard a rumbling, clanking noise: a small steam locomotive from a nearby yard came pushing a convoy of some 12-15 wagons, mostly boxcars

and a few open platform cars. It came slowly, it stopped in front of our clearing and we were ordered to get in.

Easier said than done. This was no suburban railroad station where a hundred commuters are waiting on the platforms and take hardly more than a minute to get on the train. We were two-three hundred inmates, weak, clumsy, some of us barefooted, or with wooden clogs, many lame or sick, hardly able to move and the platforms and doors of the cattle cars were high above the ground, no steps or stairs, or footstools to get in. I don't know how long it took us all to embark, but it took long, probably more than an hour. The guards were bugging us, "*los, los,*" hurry, hurry, but I don't think we were beaten. They didn't look particularly mean: they were mostly tired, old soldiers, not SS, mostly older than ourselves.

Eventually we all got on board. With my newly-found friend we "helped" some of the weaker comrades to get in, I don't know whether voluntarily or ordered to. Of course, *help* is an euphemism: we pushed them or even, with the guards, heaved them on top of those who were already in. Finally, in our car – a cattle car -- we were the last who clambered in right into the middle. and more or less sat on top of the others.

The door of the boxcar stayed open. Two guards were the last to get on. They sat on the edge, their feet dangling. I only saw their backs and the rifles they held in their laps.

For a while nothing happened. The guards yak-yakked among themselves in some German dialect that we didn't understand and the prisoners next and below groaned and moaned.

Finally, the engine let out a whistle and there was the noise of escaping steam and clanking and a lurch and slowly we got underway. It was a slow, noisy train. I don't think we were going for more than a minute when it stopped again. What happened?

Somebody shouted: "Look, the guards are gone!" And gone they were. Nobody knew what happened. To find out we both started to crawl towards the open door. Before we reached it, something unexpected happened: the sudden whine of aircraft engines and then a terrible noise: like the crash of thunder after a huge lightning in a thunderstorm, or the tearing of a sheet of paper an inch away from your ear, and then suddenly two or three thin white lines coming from nowhere into the car: tracer bullets. One of them struck next to me; I felt no pain, started groping around and there was blood on my finger. But it wasn't mine: the bullet hit the fellow right next or below me and blood was spurting out of him. Not oozing: spurting rhythmically, with every heartbeat. And groaning and crying all around inside the car. I don't know how many of us were hit.

The next thing I remember: I was out of the wagon, on the ground and there were many prisoners around likewise and every man was making as fast as he could – not he/she: this was a men's camp - making it for the woods nearby. There were no guards: they must have been the first to see the attacking plans and ran for their lives. So did we, as fast as our strength let

us: I could hardly walk but it must have been just a few seconds before I reached the first bushes, maybe a hundred feet from the train.

There were two kinds of noise audible over the cries of the wounded: the hissing of steam coming out like geysers from every part of the locomotive's boiler -- it must have taken quite some punishment and it was a funny sight -- and the ever-stronger sound of the planes growing to a sudden crescendo.

As I looked up from the safety of the bushes, here they were again coming right at me! Then the leading edge of the wing of the lead plane burst out in red, yellow and orange flames and there was this crashing noise again and the lines of the tracer bullets.

Suddenly I felt something hot, burning on my ankle, but no real pain, just something very hot. I touched it and it was blood, this time it was the real thing: my own blood. In a flash I realized that the bush under which I was hiding was no more protection than hiding my face when playing peek-a-boo. With all my strength I tried to make it for the next tree: it was only a few feet away and it was not a wide tree; by the time I reached it there was another big crash: the second plane made its pass. I felt safe enough to look and I could clearly see the figure of the pilot in the cockpit and the shape of the plane passing overhead at some unbelievable speed and could a five-pointed white star on the wing and fuselage that I have never seen before. I don't know how I could notice these things flying at 300 miles an hour at not more than a hundred feet above my head, but the picture is still in my memory.

I wanted to get up and shout: "Stop shooting you fools, stop, stop, stop! You are shooting up the wrong people. We are not enemies; we are all waiting for you, our liberators. Don't kill us!" But, of course, I didn't.

I don't know whether I crawled or ran, deeper and deeper into the woods, away from the dead and the dying.

Now I was alone. Or was I really? The forest of firs and pines wasn't dense and here and there I could see in the morning mist other miserable figures, half hidden, crawling on their bellies or on all fours. One of them was my friend and we continued together to meander in the woods. We were lost and trying to figure out what to do next? Escape? Sure, you couldn't see a guard anywhere. But how far could you get in your striped uniform before being seen and they would surely turn you in and you knew the penalty for attempting to escape: death by hanging. Hanging: there were plenty of trees to be hanged on, but where would the rope come from? Of course, if any of the guards caught you he could shoot you on the spot without further ado: no such thing as due process.

Hide? There were plenty of bushes to crawl under as far as we recalled, the guards had no dogs. But how long could you survive without food, water or shelter? It was cold and we were soaked through. Would we survive until the Allies arrived? And how would we know in the woods when they arrived, when to come out in the open?

We couldn't decide and we continued in the woods without any goal in sight or in our minds. Deadly afraid that if a guard saw us and thought we were escaping he would shoot us. Our dilemma was solved a few minutes later when we saw quite far from us, on a trail, there came maybe a dozen stragglers herded together by an old, tired German soldier. I don't recall whether we joined them or they came our way: we didn't even try to hide. The guard didn't remove the rifle from his shoulder, just beckoned to us, tired, almost friendly: *Kommt mit, kinder*, "Come, join us, boys!" We did and other stragglers did: was it the herd instinct? I don't think the guard really cared, or that other guards did: there was no shooting, they weren't really after the escapees if there were any.

Nothing happened during the long march which probably took the better part of the day, except that I was very hungry and very thirsty. I don't think I have had anything to eat or drink for more than a day. My wound hurt a little, but the bleeding stopped: it was just a superficial wound, thank God. We were all apathetic, nobody spoke.

There wasn't much traffic on the highway; a few wood-burning German army trucks passed us. At one point we crossed a village; at a railway underpass there were some older men and children in army caps and swastika armbands digging a trench. Posters on walls and fences exhorting the population for a final fanatical resistance against the Jewish Bolshevik Plutocrats. The men around the ditch looked haggard and grim, but not fanatical, not even hostile.

It was drizzling as we marched all day, reached the outskirts of the town of Landsberg, went past the big prison complex where twenty years earlier Adolph Hitler wrote his *Mein Kampf*. Then the ragged column turned east, back into the forest and in the middle of a clearing there was another concentration camp. This was Lager Nummer Eins, Camp Number One, the main camp in our cluster of satellite camps of Dachau. We built it nearly a year ago and it was the central administrative unit and we all dreaded it, because this was where the prisoners from other camps who were condemned to death were brought over for hanging.

This used to be a big, teeming, camp, the biggest in the area, with nearly a thousand prisoners, but as we arrived it seemed deserted. There were just a few guards near the gate and in the watchtowers, and a few prisoners who came out and opened the gate for our sorry group to get in.

The big wooden gates with barbed wire closed behind us. There we were, the camp empty, no one in the underground barracks or huts, no food, no water. We were told to get inside and stay inside. With my friend and a few others we crawled into the nearest one. There were already three or four other inmates inside, evidently new prisoners: you could recognize the late arrivals in the concentration camp system because they wore fairly good civilian clothes instead of our striped pajamas, looked still well fed, and had good shoes..

The three were sitting around the iron stove and, of all things, boiling potatoes. They didn't welcome us and showed no intention of sharing their meal. I was wild with hunger and,

for a fleeting moment, considered the possibility of stealing some of their stuff, but they were strong, well fed, I wouldn't have had a chance and who needed a beating? Anyhow, they let me pick up the raw potato peels they have thrown away and I ate them. I think if there had been grass growing on the ground I would have eaten that too.

Again that vague, constant fear: what next? Once the guards get organized, will they round us up during the night, or next morning and just mow us down? Why did they tell us to stay inside? But exhaustion, cold and hunger were stronger than fear, and we crawled on the bunks, exhausted, cold, still hungry and fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept. I vaguely recall to have heard gunfire, but maybe that was a dream. I woke up the next morning, hurting all over from hunger and thirst and looked around. The potato eaters were gone, but some of the dirty raw potato peels around the stove still remained and I helped myself to them. Then out of the hut. It was light outside, cool, no more rain. My friend came out too, we looked around, there were a few prisoners out, wandering aimlessly. And then one of us looked up -- the typical prisoner kept his nose down, too tired to look up and what for, anyhow -- and shouted: "look, no guards in the watchtowers, they are gone."

A miracle happened, but I couldn't believe it. They must have some trick up their sleeve. Why didn't they shoot us all last evening when we arrived? Maybe they are just waiting for us, tricked us, who knows how and kill us all...