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My Memories of the

Holocaust

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Life Before The Germans

The year 1938 was of great importance to me. I was attending a private Hebrew high school – it was hard for Jews to attend public Polish high schools. We lived on the west side of Przemyśl, a city in southern Poland with a population of 50,000. The river Sam divides the city. The eastern part was the main part and held the Hebrew high school. Every day I crossed the bridge and walked three miles to my high school. Classes were held from 8 AM to 2 PM. In the morning, I walked straight to school. On the way back I walked with my friends Milek and Pinek through a marketplace called Zydowskie Miasto, which in English means Jewish town. The marketplace had many small shuls and a large 400-year-old synagogue. The walk through that market was very exciting. Many farmers and peasants brought fruits and vegetables on horse drawn wagons to sell to the city people. There was constant yelling and haggling punctuated with occasional attempts at shoplifting.

I wasn't a very good student, yet I was interested in history and astronomy. At home I had some Jewish friends, Isaac and Lusi. I had other friends Stephan, Olga, and Slawek – all three of whom were Ukrainians, and Mietek who was Polish. Mietek's father was a volksdeutsche, a German living outside Germany. We were all very good friends even though Mietek's father objected to our friendship because I was a Jew. But Mietek didn't obey his father.

In 1939 I stopped going to high school and went to work in a tool factory.

There were many rumors of war. Hitler had already occupied part of Czechoslovakia. Poland tried to prevent his invasion. They invited Goering to hunt buffalos. Goering enjoyed it very much. When he returned to Germany, he demanded to annex Danzing – a Polish city in the Baltic sea.

I joined a Zionist organization named Hanoar whose dreams were to go to Palestine despite a British blockade. We wanted to go because of the war, and the British put up the blockade because of the war.

Our house had a carpentry shop in the basement where we made beds and cots. I was hired for two hours each day to carry the lumber from the street to the basement, for which I was paid about 10 cents. I was allowed to stay in the shop where I learned how to use a plane to smooth the boards. We called one carpenter Hunchback. He always told me how important it was to keep the streets clean. He told me I should go on the streets, pick up the cigarette butts, and bring them to him to dispose of. Later I found out that he collected the tobacco from the cigarette butts and rolled them into new cigarettes, which he smoked. I was not mad at him but I thought it was funny.

I cleaned the streets with my best friend Slovik. As I write this, I remember that he asked me to teach him Yiddish. He would teach me Ukrainian.

Two events affected me greatly. The first was when Mussolini invaded Abisinia, now Etheopia. Heile Selaseie, their king asked the league of nations for help which the league largely ignored. The other event was the Spanish civil war between Franco fascism supported by Hitler, and the leftists

supported by the Soviet Union and volunteers from many nations including the United States. I didn't have a good feeling about either of these events. The Fascists were invading all over the world and I knew that fascism was bad.

Despite my feelings on the war, I spent my free time playing soccer and going to the river with my friends. In the winter I went sleigh riding from the hill Lipowice, which was very close to where I lived.

Then came September 3.

Two bridges spanned the river. One bridge was for railroad traffic the other was for pedestrians, horses and cars. As the Germans retreated, they detonated the center of the pedestrian bridge. Before it was destroyed, the Jews had been moving across the border via the bridge. After the detonation, they had to cross secretly by rafts and small boats. The Soviets were transporting the people who illegally crossed the border to Siberia, with few exceptions. My family was lucky because we had relatives who lived in the Soviet zone.

Since we lived about 150 meters from the river, I sometimes saw people swimming across the river and crossing the border. That was when, for the first time, I saw the body of a dead woman. Her body was lying on its back, on the grass between the street and the river. Her dress was raised above her knees with bullets in her head, thighs and maybe elsewhere on her body. It made a very grave impression on me.

Life Under The Soviets

Under the Soviets, life was neither very pleasant very nor easy. There was a persistent shortage of food and I had to get up very early in the morning to wait outside the bakery for bread. Sometimes even after a long wait, they would run out of bread, just as I got to the door.

After about two or three weeks of living in the Soviet zone I started working on a railroad. My first job was to widen the rails to the Soviet gauge. Since Przemysl was a border town, one or two sidings were left in the European size so that the Soviets could continue to trade with the Germans. The Soviets traded oil, which they pumped from their own pipes, for coal, which they unloaded at the railroad sidings.

The Soviets had primitive methods for unloading the coal – it was unloaded by people with shovels. If I was lucky, I was one of them. When I unloaded coal, I received bread from cooperatives, which are special Soviet stores.

After a few months, I applied to work in a locomotive repair shop. In the shop, I met many Polish citizens who, before the war, might have been anti-Semitic. Now they accepted me. In Poland, no Jew had ever worked on a railroad, but under Soviet rule, everyone was supposed to be equal.

By now it was January. At the railroad yard, I worked outside non-stop between 5 AM and 4 PM. It was extremely cold. In February, I started working on a bridge over a river that was about 30 KM from Przemysl. I started each morning with a sandwich consisting of two slices of bread with

apple marmalade. By lunchtime when I removed the sandwich from my pocket, it was completely frozen. With great difficulty, I was able to eat the sandwich, bite by painful bite. At this time, I applied to work at a locomotive repair shop.

I was lucky. I was accepted to work in the repair shop where it was warm inside. Not only was I able to work inside, but I was also able to work with steam engines. I was working 12-hour shifts and the conditions were very strict. If someone was late, he was fined an hour of pay for 3 months.

Our entertainment was very limited. The only movies were propaganda films. Lunchtime was used for lectures on the workers paradise. Attendance was voluntary, but it was better to attend.

At the end of 1940, the pact between Hitler and Stalin required both sides to remove their armies from the border. I never understood the logic until June 22, 1941 at 3 AM.

June 22, 1941 3 AM – The Germans Invade Again

As I was coming home from work at 3 AM, I heard a grenade explode. I met a border guard and asked him what was going on. He didn't know. The shooting continued all night. At dawn we ran into the basement.

Then it got quiet and remained so until Friday when the Germans crossed the border and entered the eastern part of the city. During the next week, only Soviet civilians were present to fight the Germans. Now I understood why Hitler insisted that troops withdraw from the border.

After defeating the Soviet civilians, the Germans drafted me and other Jews into cleaning up the city. The German soldiers were moving in and we had to clean out the army camp for them.

After a few weeks the Germans started a ghetto. They closed off a small part of the city and moved all the Jews into it. It was very crowded. They created a city hall called Judrenrat. The Germans issued orders and the people obeyed them. The Jews had to wear armbands with a yellow star of David.

In the ghetto, we were allowed to walk only in groups. We had to pass through a gate attended by a Ukrainian guard dressed in a police uniform. On the way back to the ghetto, it was the same procedure. A single Jew walking on the street was never to be seen again. My cousin walked on the street alone. I never saw her again. Sometimes the Gestapo stopped entire groups and took them away – never to be seen again.

The Germans also had a system of giving the Jews an ID called Ausweis. The ID carried your age, which was an important piece of information because from time to time the Gestapo took older people away. After a while, they invented a procedure called, in Polish, akcia. The procedure which was organized by age, required Jewish men and women, to congregate at certain places, be taken to the railroad, and be transported (according to the Germans) to work where they were needed.

in one case, I know of one man, who stole a gun from an SS man and shot him. Of course he was caught. They rounded up 20 Jews, built a scaffold, and hanged them. In the end it really didn't matter. They probably would have been killed anyway.

On one such akcia my mother was sick, so they shot her. Then they dragged me to work. My father was away and I didn't know where my brother was.

Life In The Camps

Soon after my mother was shot, 19 other young people and I were taken away – escorted by Ukrainian guards. Since we were taken to a passenger railroad station, we had some hope. We were waiting in a corner while the guards went to eat. As we waited, two policemen came by. One of them was my best friend, Slavek Koltun, from before the war. Seeing me he said, “Stay there, I will be right back.” I never saw him again.

We finally boarded a train. A few hours later we were in Stalowa Wola, a camp. (In English, it means Steel Village.) The camp had a guard booth and three barracks arranged in a U shape. A wooden fence with electric wire surrounded the camp.

During my first day, we were given a plan of duties and were put in block C. Block A housed German Jews who were sick. Block B had workers like us.

The next day we went to work in Herman Goering factory, a plant manufacturing anti-aircraft cannons. I worked at a machine that cut grooves on the inside of an 88 mm barrel to the exact required caliber. I was instructed for one week by a Polish worker who told me that the inside of the barrel had to be the exact size and clean like a mirror.

I placed the emery stone inside the barrels and ground them to the required size. The front of the barrel was threaded to fit a silencer. The process was cooled by naphtha and other liquids.

At some point during the grinding process, my thumb got caught and in the thread and I lost a piece of it. I didn't dare tell anyone. I went into the washroom, cleaned it, and covered it with a rag.

The hall where we worked was controlled by two SS men I called "Biondie and the other Frankenstein." They really didn't bother anybody unless they saw something they didn't like. For example, if you stopped to rest or talk to someone, they would beat the hell out of you.

One day, Merik, a German officer came to camp and ordered us outside. We left the camp under guard, and went into the woods. We stayed for a few hours and were ordered to go back. When we returned we noticed that block A was empty. The sick people had been taken away. Merik said "Richtung unbekant – destination known." I never saw them again.

In one corner of the factory, they worked on engine cylinders. Klinger, a Jew, cut off a stem, drilled a hole in it, cut it to the size of a finger ring and sold it to a Polish worker for a piece of bread. The guards took him away and shot him.

I remained in this camp until June 1944. By now, the Soviet army was advancing.

They sent us to another camp in Plaszow, a transit camp. There was no mass killing – only individual. The killing was done on a hill facing the camp. It was called "hujowa ~~jork~~", in English prickly hill. Prickly was associated with a man's genitals. In Polish it had only one meaning.

While in Piaszow, we were ordered to load or unload railroad war material.

We also met Jewish girls from Hungary. Communication was very limited – they were separated by a fence.

After 10 days or so, we were loaded on a train with many freight cars. The cars were much smaller than those in the US today – about 1/3 the size. Since they designed to transport merchandise, there were no windows. It was very tight. The SS packed about 75 people into each car. Since it was now July, it was very hot and humid. I together with a few other people who were next to a wall, carved a few holes to get some air. The trip lasted 4 days and nights.

We urinated and defecated where we stood. Some fainted; others died.

Because there was no other room, we piled the dead one on top of the other.

A friend of mine named Hirschorn began to hallucinate, talking of seeing things that weren't there.

Finally, we arrived in a station named Mauthausen. The SS men opened the door and let the living out. Seeing the holes in the car, the SS men started screaming that we would have to pay for the damage.

Then, a column of us started to walk up the hill. We came to a concrete fence with a gate. Above the gate were the words "Arbeit macht frei" – labor makes free.

We entered the camp and received a shower. We thought it was a gas chamber.

After the shower, we were given new uniforms with white and blue vertical stripes. We got numbers and triangles for ID. My number was 87404 with a yellow triangle identifying me as a Jew. A red triangle meant political, green criminal, purple meant homosexual.

We were assigned to go to block 21. We were put in a room that could not hold all the people, so we went in one by one, sat down, spread our legs and the next guy sat in front of you between your legs. We did this until everyone was packed into the room.

In the morning, we went to work in a stone quarry that was 184 steps below ground level. We would carry heavy stones up the steps and place them down ¼ mile away. Then we would return to the quarry to do it over again. We did this 5 times a day. Once I saw someone fall from the ledge into the quarry.

In all the time I was in the camp I saw many executions and other forms of death. By now, seeing death was nothing special. But, there is one case that is stuck in my head. I can't forget it. One man, a German Jew named Frederick was in my group working like any of us, but he was in his 50's. He was stopped while doing his work and approached by a guard who told him he was too old. Frederick pleaded with him to no avail. The guard raised his leg and showed his wounds that he received on the Russian front. That was why he was now a guard in a concentration camp. The guard didn't feel sorry for himself for the wounds, so Frederick shouldn't feel sorry for himself either. The SS man was not sarcastic. He just took Mr. Frederick away and I never saw him again.

Block 27 was gas chamber

In the large concentration camps like Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Matthausen they murdered people. Those camps were also distribution camps. Between the end of 1941 and 1942, the factories near the small camps were short of workers so Jews were able to work until they got old or sick. In some cases the SS did the killing right there. Otherwise, the people were sent back to the “mother” camp.

After two weeks in Matthausen, I and a group of other Jews was sent to Linz Drei. The next day I went to work. This place too was called Herman Goering shops. There were 7 of us. They put us to work in the tool department where we took care of tools cleaning them and sharpening the knives for lathes. It was an enclosed place and only one German mechanic supervised us. The other workers on the machines in the hall were French forced labor; there was no communication between us.

Since Linz was at the foot of the Alps, it started to get cold some time around October. We were freezing because our clothing was very thin. We could only get warm in the washing place. Since, by now the allies were bombing the railroads and factories, they did damage to the building, breaking the windows. The last place of warmth disappeared.

In March 1945 I got sick. I was put into a barracks called “revier.” There was nothing or very little to eat. But I was very fortunate. Some of my friends, I remember two, Trachtenberg and Hishorn – the guy was haluninating – shared some soup with me. This soup kept me alive.

One day before we were supposed to be sent back to Matthausen, the head of my old barracks, a German with a red (political) triangle, got me out of there and brought me back to the main barracks, where I got better. My luck was that people, even in such misery, didn't lose their humanity.

Sunday, May 5, 1945 – Liberation

On Sunday May 5 early in the morning when hundreds of SS men gave us orders to march into the woods. As we marched, we saw American observation planes flying very close to the ground as if they were following us. All of a sudden, all the SS men disappeared and we thought we were free. And we were.

We went back to the camp because it was the only place we knew. In the morning, three Americans came to the camp to check on us. Then Germans came in to pick up the dead bodies and bury them.

There were many pictures being taken. I was in a haze so I cannot describe it well.

We were examined by doctors. The sick people were taken to the hospital. I was OK, but I visited some friends in the hospital.

I moved to Linz with two of my friends where we occupied an empty house. It was a family house. We looked in a closet and found a uniform of S.A. Sturm Abtilung – attack battalion. We lived in the house for three weeks and then moved to a larger house.

Across the street there was an American outpost that guarded SS prisoners of war. The prisoners behaved well and were not mistreated.