

The Story of Shmuel ROTH

1895 – 1945

contributed

by

Rifky (née ROTH) ATKIN

(Grand-daughter of Shmuel ROTH and first cousin to Eugene KATZ)

Shmuel Dov Roth was born on October 12, 1895 in the town of Stropkov, Slovakia. He was the oldest child of the twelve children of Hillel and Reizl Roth, and was always proud of the fact that not only was he the B'chor, he was also the son of a B'chor (Hillel Roth), the grandson of a B'chor (David Roth) as well as the great-grandson of a b'chor (Hillel Roth the elder). He was also the father of a b'chor, Usher (Arthur) Roth.

As a youth, he was liked for his good sense of humor and his natural talent as a storyteller, and was particularly gifted in the game of chess. The ability to tell stories with great flair was to be inherited by his youngest son, Yitzchok Meir (Eugene).

Shmuel Dov was 19 years old and living in Vranov, Slovakia when World War I broke out in the year 1914, and he was drafted into the army. Eventually, two of his brothers, Yitzchok and Yosef, were also drafted, as was his father Hillel, at age 37.

After some time, the Roths were informed by a neighbor that Shmuel had been shot and killed. In truth, he had been injured by shrapnel in the palm of his right hand, and was held prisoner by the Russians from 1918-1919 (?), and returned home upon his release.

In 1922, Shmuel married Chava (Elsa) Singer, who was from the town of Cigelka. They decided to settle in Ehrmihalyfalva (renamed by the Romanians as "Valea Lui Mihai", or Valley of Michael), Romania since Shmuel's brother Yitzchok had settled there with his family. The town had a population of approximately 15,000. Besides being a provincial capitol, it occupied an important point strategically as a railroad junction on the main Bucharest-Prague line. It was built in a valley surrounded by rolling hills with rich, fertile soil growing every important agricultural product including several fine varieties of grapes. Light industry developed and with time it became a prosperous boom town. The ethnic mixture of the town was 70% Hungarian, 20% Jewish, and 5% Romanian. The Jews living there benefited from this prosperity too, and the Jewish population eventually grew to 600 families. Jewish education was maintained by the Jewish population, with their own schools and yeshivas that were supported by taxes collected by the local Jewish community.

In 1923 Shmuel and Chava Roth's b'chor, Usher Yishayohu was born. His secular given name was Adolf, but in time he understandably changed his name to Arthur. Shmuel and Chava had their second child, a daughter named Hinda (Helena) in 1924. Their youngest child, Yitzchok Meir (Eugene) was born in 1926, and not long after, Chava Singer was required to undergo surgery, which prevented her from having any more children.

Most of the Roth family had remained in Vranov, but by the early 1930's Shmuel's siblings, beginning with his brother Pinchos had begun to make Aliyah. In 1934, his

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parents, Hillel and Reizl, and his youngest brother Nechemia began their journey to the Holy Land, and they stayed with Shmuel and his family for four weeks before making Aliyah. Usher Roth remembers this time fondly, and recalls giving his uncle Nechemiah (who was to him more of a peer or cousin, rather than an uncle), a pocketwatch.

To support his family, Shmuel tried various businesses. He started out as an insurance salesman. His next venture was as a traveling salesman, buying and exporting medicinal herbs to Czechoslovakia. Eventually he became a trader, dealing mostly in jewelry and foreign currency exchange, and with time became quite successful. This line of work required that he travel quite frequently, and his trips took him often to Switzerland. He was able to get newly-mined gold in Romania, have it refined, and then sewn into Talesim (Talitot) which he then took with him to Switzerland to sell. If questioned, he would say that these were religious garments. In time, his travels took him to Budapest, a 5-hour trip from his home, where by 1940-1943 he would be spending nearly each week from Monday through Friday.

During these years, major events had started occurring elsewhere in Europe that would have profound ramifications on the Jews and would inevitably impact the Jews in the area in which Shmuel and his family lived. Though life in this part of Europe continued to be normal and fortunately somewhat removed from the turmoil and destruction being spread by the Nazis elsewhere in Europe, by 1940 the situation for Shmuel and his family began to change. In 1940 the part of Romania in which Shmuel and his family lived was taken over by the Hungarians and the same extremist laws that had been imposed on Jews elsewhere in Europe were now the law of the land in their towns too. Jews were deprived of their livelihoods and prevented from entering colleges and universities, dooming them to grow up without a higher education. Disruption of their trade and commerce posed a great threat to the lives of the Jews. Despite the inhumane and vicious treatment, the Jews in the area managed to maintain charitable organizations and were able to stem extreme poverty by distributing food and clothing to the needy.

Jewish life in Ehrmihalyfalva and the towns surrounding it took a sharp turn for the worse on March 19, 1944, when German control was imposed on Hungary. The fate of more than three quarters of a million Jews who had previously seemed to be safe from Nazi terror was now in grave jeopardy.

The day after Pesach in 1944, police approached the house of Shmuel Roth and informed him that his oldest son Usher was required to report to the army in two days time. Usher told his father he did not want to go. Wisely, Shmuel encouraged his son to take this as an opportunity to possibly save his own life. Fortunately, Usher heeded the advice of his father, and joined the Labor Brigade, a unit that was attached to the army. In this battalion, Usher joined more than 50,000 Hungarian Jews who had been forced to serve

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on the eastern front as part of Hungary's war effort against Russia. His time spent in this brigade was filled with hardship, but spared him the horrors of the concentration camps that his parents and siblings would eventually be subjected to.

Just three weeks after Usher was drafted into the Labor Brigade, Shmuel, Chava, Hinda and Yitzchok Meir Roth were deported to the ghetto Nagyvarad ("Gross Vardein" in Yiddish). As the family packed up what belongings they could take, Shmuel hastily wrote a postcard to his son Usher. This postcard would eventually reach Usher, and sustain him through the hardship and difficulties he would endure for the next several months. It would remain with him, folded up in his pocket, and at least once was nearly left and forgotten in the confusion and chaos. But Usher risked his life to retrieve the postcard, feeding on the strength from the written words of his father, and surely from Shmuel's spoken words that echoed in his mind as well.

Today, the postcard that was guarded and saved by Usher is treasured by Shmuel's survivors. The faded words on the postcard, translated from the original Hungarian, are as follows:

*To: Roth, Adolph
P.O. ??
Nagybanya*

My Dear Child,

I am now saying goodbye to you. We are all packed up. We are most probably going somewhere today, but to where, we don't know – maybe to Varad. G-d should help us, so that we should all see each other again one day. Don't worry, G-d will be with us. Pray for us. If it will be possible, we will write you.

Kisses and G-d be with you,

All of us

While Shmuel and Chava and their younger children were being deported to the ghetto in Gross Vardein and to an uncertain fate, Usher was adjusting to life in the Labor Brigade. The members of this brigade were attired in civilian clothes with obligatory yellow arm bands. Their work consisted of all manner of manual labor (for example, digging ditches), and they were transferred from town to town as the work required. On the whole, they were treated and fed fairly well.

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After some time, the Hungarian Army, and with it the Labor Brigade, began retreating towards Austria as the Russians advanced. In November, 1944, Usher and seven other colleagues decided to break away from the group. Their plan was to run away from the Hungarian Army and go towards the Russians in order to be liberated from their forced labor. Soon, with masses of people going in one direction retreating from the Russians, Usher and the seven men with him were going in the opposite direction of the crowd. They tore off their yellow arm bands and eventually found an old fortress in which they hid. However, in the morning when they awoke, they found to their surprise that the Russians had been pushed back by the Germans – and they were now surrounded by Germans, and not the Russians as they had expected.

Usher and the seven men with him hid in an old oven for three days until they determined that the Germans had left. Soon afterwards, the fortress came under heavy fire from the Russians, who had surrounded it. At 3:00 that morning, the eight young men decided to come out. A Russian soldier came out and started shooting, shouting “Hands up!”, accusing the young men of being Germans. They stated that they were Jews – to which he responded that they were to hand over their valuables, and that they would be killed. Their lives were saved by a surprise hero: a Russian captain on a horse appeared, fluent in Yiddish. The eight young Jews realized that the appearance of this fellow Jew, in the unlikely of places, was a near-miracle. It was because of him that their lives were spared.

Usher and his seven companions were then able to get food and warm clothes. But they were still 1,000 miles away from Ehrmihalyfalva. They managed to hitch a ride 250 miles in a truck. Usher remembers it as a truck that was used to transport army materials back and forth from Russia, and he recalls holding on for dear life to the edges of the truck as they were driven over curved and dangerous roads.

The truck transported them to Yugoslavia at night. They remained in a railway station overnight until the curfew was over and they were allowed to go out. From there, they took a train and managed to return to Ehrmihalyfalva by November, 1944. There weren't any Jews remaining there except for several women who were war widows, whom the Germans did not deport. One of these women gave Usher some food and drink. He returned to his house and tried to salvage some of the pictures and papers that lay scattered on the floor of the house. He was not aware of the existence of some money that was hidden by his father months before, as the family was being deported to the ghetto. Among the items he found and subsequently saved, was a beautiful wooden megillah holder that Ephraim Roth had carved for his brother Shmuel.

Though Usher was back in Ermihalyfalva, he had no way of knowing the whereabouts of his parents and siblings. The cherished postcard he still had in his pocket told him that

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they were likely deported three weeks after he had joined the Labor Brigade. The details of their journey, however, were not revealed to him until several months later.

After Shmuel had written the postcard containing his last words to his oldest son, Usher, he, Chava, Hinda, and Yitzchok Meir, along with 36,000 other Hungarian Jews, were deported on May 4th to the ghetto in Nagyvarad. Tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews were forced to leave their homes in this manner, and move into specially designated ghetto areas.

Martin Gilbert, the famous historian, describes in his book “Atlas of the Holocaust” the method of deportation to the ghettos used by the Germans:

On entering each Hungarian town or village, one Gestapo method was to seize several leading citizens, and then threaten to kill them unless the community agreed to a punitive ransom. In this way, the Jews of the town were impoverished overnight, without even the money to buy railway tickets. The ransom exercise also made the SS seem plausible: they had said they would release the hostages as soon as the money was paid, and they had kept their word. When the SS then said ‘we have orders to put you in brick factories and timber yards *and no harm will come to you*’, it could be believed. ‘Quite soon’, the SS told those who had been thus confined, ‘you will go east to help with the harvest’.

This is precisely what happened to Shmuel Roth. On the last Saturday before the family was deported to the ghetto, Shmuel was summoned to an SS Interrogation Room and told to hand over a ransom of money. Shmuel countered that he had served his country in World War I – and besides, he said, he had no money to give them. For this response, he was beaten by the authorities, but his life was spared. He was told by the SS that it wasn’t worth wasting one of their bullets on him.

At 4:00A.M. on Monday, May 4, 1944, the SS woke the Roth family and ordered them to vacate the house for deportation to the ghetto. Told to pack up a limited amount of belongings, and enough food for three weeks, the Jews in the town hastily tried to gather what they could. Hinda recalled how hard it was as a teenaged girl to decide which pieces of her life were to go with her, and which would have to be left behind. One of the SS men ordering the deportation watched as this young girl frantically tried to decide which dresses to take with her to the ghetto. She remembered seeing a touch of humanity in this Nazi – looking closely, she could notice that he had tears in his eyes as he watched this family, one of many, being forced to leave their home.

With only moments left to the life they had known in Ehrmihalyfalva, Shmuel, leaning against the nearby window, hastily wrote the postcard to Usher. As Yitzchok Meir watched his father writing what were to be his final words to his oldest son, he couldn’t hold back his tears, and began to cry silently. Shmuel looked up from his writing, saw his

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youngest child's tears and said, "If Yitzchok Meir cries, it must be very bad". Then he and Yitzchok Meir went down to the cellar, where there was a summer kitchen. Quickly and meticulously, Yitzchok Meir removed a brick in the foundation of the house, and in its place inserted a metal box in which Shmuel hid the equivalent of \$500.00 and a gold cigarette box. They covered the exposed area with dirt, and then returned to the main level of the house, not knowing if any one of them would ever see the metal box and its contents again.

Shmuel and his family remained in the ghetto for three weeks. Some of the Jews that were deported there were able to live in regular housing. The Roths had no such luck, and were forced to live in a lumberyard with many other people. They managed to assemble a makeshift shack, affording them little protection from the elements.

Three weeks after arriving in the ghetto, Shmuel and his family were told they would be leaving, and would be heading east as the SS had told them weeks before. The deportation of the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz had begun on May 15, 1944, and the number of victims of these deportations would reach 250,000 in just under eight weeks. Hitler's last effort at destroying this one remaining and unharmed segment of European Jewry was executed with the utmost speed, scale and efficiency.

They were then herded on to cattle cars for a three-day, three-night journey. On his frequent travels to Budapest, Shmuel had met many Jews from Poland and a number of these people had told him of the events that were occurring in Poland and in particular to Polish Jewry. So while he was locked up in the cattle car, on a journey with an unknown destination, he knew enough to realize that the train tracks were pointing them towards Poland. This, he knew, did not bode well for them. On that long and humiliating journey, Shmuel took a razor to his face and shaved off his beard, hoping his clean-shaven face would help him to look younger.

In the book "Atlas of the Holocaust", Martin Gilbert describes these deportations:

Each deportation train bore the deceptive inscription 'German worker-resettlers'. Up to 100 people were forced into each wagon. Like the earlier French, Dutch, Belgian and Greek deportees, they were allowed only a single bucket of water and a single waste bucket to each wagon. Hundreds died during the journey. Many committed suicide or were driven insane by confinement and fear. Others were killed or robbed whenever the train had to stop for traffic control.

As the train came to its final stop in Auschwitz on May 23, 1944, the doors were suddenly swung open, and the natural light of day suddenly pierced the darkness that had settled over the interior of the cattle car during its three-day journey. The surviving passengers squinted from the sun's rude but welcome intrusion, still not knowing where

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they were. But from the screams of the SS guards, the barking of dogs and general chaos, they knew that whatever lay in store for them in this place was far from good.

Yitzchok Meir recalled that within moments of the opening of the cattle car doors, several men who had been waiting on the platform quickly entered the train, hastily pushing aside the dead bodies and forcing those that had survived off the train and onto the platform. The passengers' first impression was that these were SS guards with a somewhat uncharacteristic and un-German bedraggled appearance. But on closer inspection, they realized that these were Jewish men who were inmates themselves and that under their breaths they were muttering some sort of message to the passengers. Listening closely, Shmuel and his family realized the words being whispered were in Hebrew, to avoid the Germans' understanding. With slow realization, the Roths and the other passengers understood the message these seasoned inmates and fellow Jews were trying to get across to them: "You are between the ages of 18 and 54. You are not older; you are not younger". This message was repeated over and over by the inmates, in their own personal attempt at minimizing the loss of Jewish lives that they knew would shortly take place.

Though Shmuel was several years younger than the upper range of 54 that was now regarded as an age with new significance, he determined that it would be to his benefit if the Germans thought he was even younger than his actual age of 48. So from that point on, when asked when he was born, he would give the year "1903" as his year of birth. And, in fact, when Shmuel's survivors today examine some of the official documents and incarceration papers obtained from this period of his life, they can see the false birth year of 1903 on each and every one of these forms.

As they were getting off the train, another message making the rounds on the platform was that a profession in demand was the job of Glazier. And so Shmuel and Yitzchok Meir decided then and there that when asked what they did for a living, the answer would be "glazier". This is consistent with the information that appears on the incarceration papers of both Yitzchok Meir and Shmuel Dov that are now in the hands of their survivors – at each place where the inmate's line of work must be supplied, both father and son answered "glaziermeister".

The Roth family and the hundreds of Hungarian Jews arriving in Auschwitz that day with them were brutally herded onto the platform and towards the selection area. The infamous Josef Mengele was overseeing the selection process. Yitzchok Meir and Shmuel were ordered to the right, as was Hinda. Chava, however, was ordered to go the left, in the direction of the gas chambers and immediate death. When Chava realized that she alone from her family was sent to the left side, she walked behind the Germans and was able to return to the other side to reunite with her daughter. Chava remained with

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Hinda in Auschwitz for three more weeks. At one of the daily selections, Chava was chosen. Hinda recalled that upon being chosen for this selection, Chava reached out to her, and offered her daughter the portion of daily bread she had received, saying “Here – please take this since where I am going, I will not be needing this...”. Chava’s premonition at that moment was correct: she and the rest of the chosen group were killed that day. Hinda went on to survive Auschwitz and several other camps. After the war she was taken with a group of female refugees to Sweden, and eventually she returned to her hometown and was re-united with her brothers.

Upon arrival at the concentration camps, if one were fortunate enough to survive the notorious selection process, then as a new inmate of the camp, each prisoner was issued his own “personal” set of a spoon and a bowl. These utensils were to be used for the duration of the inmate’s imprisonment, the receptacle for the measly and pitiful “soup” concoction that they were fed each day. Other than the striped uniform and wooden clogs worn by the inmates, these were the only objects that any one of them could claim ownership to. Within hours of their arrival in Auschwitz, Shmuel and Yitzchok Meir Roth, like the thousands of Jews around them, were also issued these items.

Part of the Nazi plan to de-humanize the Jews was the total removal of anything personal that the newly-admitted prisoners may have managed to bring with them. Any new visitor to Auschwitz-Birkenau nowadays (currently, nearly sixty years after the war ended) is immediately confronted by this awful fact; He is faced with mountains of personal items that were confiscated from the prisoners. Everyday items, once taken for granted in their simple ordinariness, are transformed into tiny specks among a mountain of similar objects, devoid of personal attachment to anyone or anything. Closer inspection reveals traces of the lives that they once belonged to: In the mountain of suitcases an observer can discern names and addresses of the former owners. Among the pile of hair shorn from the incarcerated, a golden blond braid rests prominently at the forefront. In between the mounds of discarded shoes and boots, one can spot a tiny pair belonging to a toddler. And amid the stack of hair brushes and combs, a well-used toothbrush may be noticed.

With all the personal belongings being snatched from him one by one, his toothbrush, the most ordinary of items, suddenly acquired immediate importance and value to Yitzchok Meir. Years later, he would tell his children how his decision to hide that toothbrush helped him retain some semblance of humanity and cleanliness in the nightmare of the concentration camps. With careful secrecy, Yitzchok Meir broke off the stem of the toothbrush until all that remained of it was the top, the part containing the brush and bristles. At first, Yitzchok Meir hid this forbidden instrument in his underarm. When he was issued his own spoon and bowl, he resourcefully developed a new hiding place for the toothbrush. In the handle of the spoon that he was given for his daily meal, he

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carefully hollowed out a space in which to hide the forbidden toothbrush remnant. Each day of his imprisonment, Yitzchok Meir managed to collect the tiniest of pebbles to use as an abrasive substance on the toothbrush. This unique attempt at personal cleanliness was not just his individual way of maintaining the proper dental hygiene that he had always valued, but also was a remaining link to his former life, and to his value as a human being.

After spending a week in Auschwitz, both Yitzchok Meir and Shmuel were selected to join a transport that would take them to Buchenwald, and later to a camp called Rehmsdorf. Yitzchok Meir recalled that on their arrival at Buchenwald, the Germans, in their typical fastidiousness and organization, had meticulously filled out detailed forms containing personal descriptions and information about the prisoners. Many years later, in 1968, after imploring the International Tracing Service of the International Red Cross for help in locating these documents, Yitzchok Meir's and Shmuel's incarceration papers were located and forwarded to him in the U.S. The photograph on the form shows eighteen-year old Yitzchok Meir looking wearily but somewhat defiantly at the camera, bald and gaunt and wearing the familiar striped concentration camp uniform. Though only in the German camps little more than one week at this time, he already was showing the signs of deprivation and starvation, and in the picture his appearance is that of someone closer in age to his father, who at that time was 48. Any stranger glancing at this picture would be shocked to know that the face is that of a young man still in his teens.

From Buchenwald, Shmuel and Yitzchok Meir were transferred to a nearby camp called Rehmsdorf, where they worked in a factory in Weimar that converted coal to gasoline, which was then transported in large pipes. With the Allied armies advancing, the factory was bombed, and many of these gasoline pipes exploded. The insulation in these pipes contained asbestos, which had the appearance of snow and was scattered in a fine powder over the factory. It was there, in the camp at Rehmsdorf, that Yitzchok Meir was exposed to this deadly carcinogen. The harmful effects of this exposure did not become apparent until 30 years later, when Yitzchok Meir was diagnosed with malignant mesothelioma, which is sometimes referred to as asbestos cancer and is incurable.

As inmates of Rehmsdorf, Shmuel and Yitzchok Meir were starving, and like all their fellow prisoners, they were constantly looking for new food. One day, Yitzchok Meir and another inmate spotted a porcupine that was close to death. The two prisoners quietly discussed how they might be able to secretly smuggle the animal to their barracks and how it would provide the nourishment that their starving bodies craved. While they whispered and tried to come up with a workable plan, two SS guards suddenly appeared and threatened the two Jews with death. But instead of killing them, the SS guards

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instead pursued the two young Jews back to the barracks. They arrived at the barracks grateful that their lives were spared, but sorely disappointed that the meal they had dreamed would be theirs', was not to be. As the two prisoners lamented the loss of the delicacy that was almost in their hands, they heard a sudden boom as a bomb exploded nearby. Shortly after, they found out how lucky they had been. At the spot where they had been standing moments before, the two guards that had just threatened them with death were now themselves dead from the blast of the bomb. Had Yitzchok Meir and the other inmate been successful at spiring away the porcupine, and not been chased back to their barracks by the SS, they too would have been victims of the bomb blast.

Yitzchok Meir and Shmuel remained at this camp until January, 1945. By this time, the cold winter, deprivation and hard labor had worn them both down. Shmuel, in particular, suffered from painful sores that had developed on his feet. The wooden shoes that he and the other inmates wore had fallen apart, and in a desperate attempt to shield the open and festering wounds, he wrapped his feet in rags and papers that he had managed to collect. The pain from the blistering sores began to get worse, until eventually Shmuel could barely walk and had to rely on his son to carry him on his back.

It was only a matter of time before Shmuel had to be taken to the infirmary in Rehmsdorf. Yitzchok Meir would visit him each night after returning from forced labor. But one night, Yitzchok Meir appeared at the infirmary – and Shmuel was gone.

It wasn't until many years later that Yitzchok Meir met another man who had been in the infirmary with Shmuel – and this man told him where Shmuel was taken when he disappeared from the infirmary. Shmuel and the other men in the Rehmsdorf infirmary were put on a train to take them back to Buchenwald. The train transporting them had no roof, exposing its passengers to the full fury of the German winter. By the end of the two-week trip back to Buchenwald, most of the passengers had died of starvation and exposure. Those that survived, Shmuel among them, had to resort to removing the coats from the dead to cover their own frozen bodies.

When the surviving passengers arrived at Buchenwald, they were brought to the infirmary there. Shmuel was desperately ill with dysentery, but still alive. With him in the Buchenwald infirmary was a man named Baruch Greenberger, whom he knew from his hometown of Ehrmihalyfalva. Many years after the war had ended, Baruch, now a diamond merchant and resident of Tel Aviv, met Hillel Roth, the father of Shmuel Roth, and related to him the events that finally took his son's life: Baruch witnessed an SS doctor entering the infirmary with a syringe in his hands, and quickly determined that this would be used as an instrument of death for the patients there. He immediately rose and headed for the bathroom, remaining there until he was sure the SS doctor had left the

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infirmary. Sure enough, when he returned to the beds he found that the patients there, including Shmuel Dov, were all dead, victims of a poisonous injection to the heart.

The Buchenwald incarceration paper of Shmuel Dov Roth that his son Yitzchok Meir would retrieve from the International Tracing Service many years later, bears witness to the tragic finality of his death. Stamped impersonally on the form, next to all the personal data that, to the Germans, made up a person's life, are the stark and brutal words:

Gestorben: 26 Feb. 1945 (Died: February 26, 1945)

Abgegetzt: 27 Feb. 1945 (Recorded: February 27, 1945)

During this time, Yitzchok Meir feared the worst fate had befallen his father, but he still held the hope that somehow he was still alive. Meanwhile, he remained in the camp in Rehmsdorf. By April, 1945, when it became apparent that Germany was losing its battle with the Allies, the Nazis embarked on a mission of sending the remaining concentration camp inmates on infamous Death Marches.

Historian Martin Gilbert in "Atlas of the Holocaust" describes the twisted German logic as follows:

From the first days of April it became clear that the Russian and western Allies would continue to advance until they met somewhere in the middle of Germany. But still Hitler hoped that the German army would be able to hold out in a mountainous area, either the Sudeten mountains or the Austrian Alps, and continue the war.

Two separate policies now drove the SS to prolong the agony of the death marches: the desire to prevent the Allies from liberating anyone who had been a witness of mass murder, and the wish to preserve for as long as possible a mass of slave labor for all the needs which confronted the disintegrating army: repairing roads and railway tracks, building up railway embankments, repairing bridges, excavating underground bunkers from which the battle could still be directed, preparing tank traps to check the Allied advance, and helping with the incredibly difficult work involved in preparing mountain fortresses deep underground.

Over and above these reasons, however, there remained the ever-present, all-pervading Nazi obsession that Jews were not human beings, that they must be made to suffer, and that it did not matter if they were to die, however cruel the circumstances. The death marches and death trains therefore continued, despite the increasing chaos on the roads and railways following the collapse of both the western and eastern fronts.

Yitzchok Meir was a survivor of one of these death marches. On April 27, he and 2,775 Jewish slave laborers from Rehmsdorf were sent eastward from the camp, heading to the camp of Theresienstadt. At Marienbad station, 1,000 of these Jews were killed by machine-gun fire, and an additional 1,200 were killed as the death march continued, the

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corpses thrown into mass graves which were filled up afterward. Upon reaching Theresienstadt, 500 more people were killed on arrival. Of the original group of nearly 3,000 Jews, only 75 survived, including Yitzchok Meir.

During the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, on August 7, 1946, the statement of Baron Van Lamsweerde, a Dutch survivor of the death march that Yitzchok Meir was subjected to, was read to the judiciaries. Yitzchok Meir located the text of this statement years after the war ended, and it was found in his personal papers after his death. The description of the death march as told by the Dutch survivor mirrored Yitzchok Meir's own experience, and spoke in raw detail of the horror endured by the survivors of this death march. Following are the words of Baron Van Lamsweerde immortalized in the Nuremberg military tribunal transcripts that Yitzchok Meir saved:

Finally on 12 November 1944, I was imprisoned in the Concentration Camp Rehmsdorff where I stayed until my escape on 20 April 1945. At the approach of the Allied Forces, the camp at Rehmsdorff was evacuated in great haste and the political prisoners of the camp were transported to the Theresienstadt Camp.

At first the prisoners were transported by train and in goods vans. We arrived by train at Marienbad, where, for causes I do not know, we had a delay of about one week. The vans with the prisoners were kept standing at the station. In the course of that week Allied bombers attacked the Marienbad station and in the confusion some 1,000 prisoners escaped into the surrounding woods. Naturally the entire local service (the SS, Volkssturm, and Hitlerjugend) was set to work to recapture the escaped prisoners, and practically all prisoners, who of course wore their camp clothes and could easily be recognized, were recaptured. These prisoners, about a thousand men, were led back in groups to Marienbad station and there they were killed by the SS guards by a shot in the neck. As both engines of the train had been wrecked during the air attack, the prisoners had to walk all the way from Marienbad to Theresienstadt. Many among them were unable to go so far, and fell down along the road totally exhausted; without exception these prisoners were murdered by the guards by a shot in the neck. That evening their bodies were removed by lorry and buried in mass graves in the woods. I am fully prepared to assist in tracing them.

When the transport started I heard the SS guards saying that the total number of prisoners amounted to 2,775. Only some 500 of these prisoners reached Theresienstadt. The others were murdered during the transport... The leader of the transport was SS Oberscharfuhrer Schmidt, one of the hangmen of Buchenwald, who also there behaved in a most scandalous way toward the prisoners, and who was known to be a sadist.

Years later, Yitzchok Meir told Usher about some of the other Jewish slave laborers that were with him on that infamous death march. One famous survivor was none other than Rabbi Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe. Another one of the marchers that Yitzchok Meir knew, named Shlomo Spitzer, was not as fortunate. He recalled his friend, Shlomo, at one point succumbing to his withering exhaustion and sitting down for a moment's rest. Within seconds he was shot in the head by the SS, his blood splattering all over his friend. Soon, Yitzchok Meir too felt he no longer had the energy or the will to continue

The Story of Shmuel ROTH 1895 – 1945

contributed

by

Rifky (née ROTH) ATKIN

(Grand-daughter of Shmuel ROTH and first cousin to Eugene KATZ)

on what seemed to him to be a march to Death. Just as he was about to sit down and take a few moments of rest from the overwhelming fatigue, he felt a strong and startling kick, shaking him momentarily from his thoughts of rest: It was not an SS guard, but rather a friend from his town named Nusi (Natan) Weiss, who reprimanded him, saying “NO! You must get up!”. Nusi Weiss survived the death march with Yitzchok Meir, and today lives in Israel. Yitzchok Meir always credited him with saving his life.

Theresienstadt, the final destination of the death march, had once served as the “model concentration camp”, if there could be such a thing. But at this point in the war, in late April through early May, 1945, it was a model of disease and despair, housing the starved and dying survivors of other concentration camps. The defeat of the Germans at this point was inevitable and imminent. By May 8, 1945, the Allies accepted the unconditional surrender of Germany. The Russians entered Theresienstadt and found 575 people clinging to life, many of them suffering from typhus, including Yitzchok Meir.

The Russians took over the infirmary at the Theresienstadt camp, and Yitzchok Meir remained there for two months recuperating and regaining enough strength to return home. Returning home in those post-war days was not a simple thing, and between the chaos and practically non-existent train service, the trip back home took nearly two weeks. He arrived in Ehrmihalyfalva in July, 1945.

For the past nine months, Usher had meanwhile begun to re-build a life for himself, becoming involved with a partner in selling raw wool to local manufacturers. The family home was left in shambles, and besides the scattered family photos and the carved wooden megillah holder belonging to his father, nothing was left. So Usher had moved into an apartment belonging to a landlord in the town who took pity on him and the other refugees that had begun to return from the front.

On that particular day when Yitzchok Meir returned to Ehrmihalyfalva, Usher was out of town on business, selling his goods in a nearby town, and sleeping there overnight. Finding his family’s home empty, looted, and abandoned, Yitzchok Meir contacted several distant relatives who were also refugees living in the same town, and stayed with them overnight. These relatives informed him that his brother was indeed alive, was merely away on business for the night, and would most likely be returning the next day.

As the cousins had predicted, Usher did indeed return the next day and Yitzchok Meir was ready and waiting for him. To Usher’s shock, he was suddenly faced with an impoverished, emaciated, and totally unrecognizable stranger who was greeting him with a familiar voice and the startling words “Hello! You don’t recognize me?!” The two brothers hugged in an emotional and bittersweet reunion.

The Story of Shmuel ROTH

1895 – 1945

contributed

by

Rifky (née ROTH) ATKIN

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Usher inquired after the whereabouts of their parents and sister, but at this point Yitzchok Meir did not know if any of them were dead or alive. Their mother's death was eventually confirmed for them by their sister, Hinda. Shmuel's death and the events that led up to it, were later related to them by the aforementioned Baruch Greenberger, the man who had been with Shmuel in the Buchenwald infirmary and who had witnessed the deaths of the patients there by a Nazi doctor's fatal injection to the heart. As it turned out, Baruch had gone to Palestine after the war, and Shmuel's father Hillel Roth became acquainted with him. Through Baruch, Hillel learned about his son's tragic fate. Hillel then wrote to his grandsons, Usher and Yitzchok Meir, informing them of their father's death and the date on which they were to observe his *yahrzeit*. This *yahrzeit* date was confirmed to them when Yitzchok Meir obtained his father's incarceration papers in 1968 with that same date of death plainly stamped in black and white.

Finally reunited with his brother after so many months of separation, Yitzchok Meir suddenly remembered that somewhere under the foundation of their house was a metal box containing a large amount of cash and a gold cigarette holder that he and his father had hidden fifteen months earlier, in what seemed like another lifetime. The two brothers quickly descended to the cellar and after a few minutes of searching were able to locate the metal box with its valuables safe inside.

The money they received from selling the gold cigarette box, together with the \$500.00 in cash stored inside the box (an enormous amount in those days) could help them in a number of ways. But instead of using the cash then, the brothers exchanged it for US dollars, and decided to save it. When their sister Hinda returned to the town, she was given her share of this inheritance.

Though Shmuel Dov Roth was no longer with his children as they and their fellow refugees faced an uncertain future, thanks to his wisdom and foresight, he had seen to it that his survivors were given some means from which to begin to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives and to begin the long and painful process of healing and rebuilding.