

War Experiences of David Kutner, 1939-1945

In September, 1939 the German army occupied Lodz (Poland). My family and myself had to wear the Star of David. We were short of food. In 1940, we were all placed in the Lodz ghetto. We only had one room between the whole family, there were five of us. I was put to work in a factory producing nails for the shoes of the German army. I worked long hours, sometimes all through the night, and there was very little food. A lot of people became ill and died from malnutrition. A lot of diseases prevailed, especially dysentery, which left us all weak. I felt weak all the time from lack of food. This way of life went on 'till 8 August, 1944 when my parents, my two sisters and myself were put on a cattle train with lots of other people. Destination, as it later transpired, was Auschwitz. It was a terrible journey. We were all packed in like "sardines". The stench of human excrements - unbearable.

On arrival at Auschwitz, I was separated from my mother and sisters. My youngest sister was screaming wildly from fear, and her screams will live with me for the rest of my life. This is the last time I saw my mother and younger sister. I don't, even to this day, know how they died, and when. My older sister survived both Auschwitz and Belsen concentration camps, but died at the age of 41, in New York.

My father was with me for a while in Birkenau (an offshoot of Auschwitz). I was separated from him around middle

to end of August, 1944 when a tattooed number, B-7623 was put on the inside of my left arm, and along with other boys of my age, we were sent to the main camp of Auschwitz, and from there, I was sent to work, to Hof Birkenau, where I was put to work in horses' stables.

The daily routine was as follows: I was woken up at 3:30 a.m. when I had to stand, together with other inmates, in one spot, for about half an hour (Appeal), to be counted, no matter what the weather, until the S.S. were satisfied that the number of inmates were present and correct. Then, from 4:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. I had to clean the horses in the stables, with a special brush, and to prove that the job was done correctly, I had to knock out so many strokes of the white dust from the horses on to the stable floor. On one occasion, the S.S. man was not satisfied with my work, so he punched me hard in the stomach, which has damaged my bowel, and to this day, my bowel is still not right. I have, on that occasion, endured a lot of pain.

At 7:00 a.m., we at last got some food, which consisted of a stale piece of dry bread and black coffee. After that, I was put to work in the fields, doing all kinds of jobs, even ploughing, a job which was most unsuitable for a boy of my age. At 12:00 mid-day, we stopped for so-called lunch, which was a bowl of soup fit for pigs, and at this point I would like to state that this was the last meal we had until the next day at 7:00 a.m. when we got the dry bread and coffee.

After the 12:00 mid-day break, I worked right through

the day, 'til it got dark, when I returned to work with the horses inside the stables. (Feeding the horses, cleaning, etc.) This work went on 'til 11:00 p.m. when we all fell, exhausted, into the bunk, to again be woken up, the next day, at 3:30 to follow the same routine, day after day, as outlined by me before.

Needless to say, there were many dead each day. If you became ill, then you were as good as dead. Things got really bad when the winter of 1944-1945 came, as we had no proper clothing to combat the weather. All through the winter weather, my hands were exposed to the severe frost, as I had no gloves, and as a result, both my hands were severely frostbitten, and to this day, my hands are still affected. I have had various treatment for the condition here in England, i.e. electrical treatment, injections, but in the end I was told that I had to live with my condition for the rest of my life.

I would also like to add that my frostbite was severely aggravated by the fact that, on one occasion, the S.S. man made me stand in one spot during a very cold day, 25° below zero, for six hours this was a punishment for some work that I had done, not to the S.S. man's liking.

On 18 January, 1945, as the Russian army was approaching from the East, we were all rounded up and surrounded by S.S. guards, started walking due west, a walk which lasted non-stop for 2 days. Anyone who dropped out was immediately shot by the guard. Unfortunately, many prisoners, who, through lack of food, were so weak, collapsed from

exhaustion, and were therefore shot. It seems that the S.S. had orders not to leave anyone behind alive. On one occasion, during that walk, it was night-time, a Russian woman prisoner (we were a mass transport of mixed nationalities, both men and women), collapsed, and as I was passing her, the guard aimed the rifle towards her half-dead body and fired two shots at her. As it was dark, I could see the fire coming out of the rifle barrel and go into the woman's body. This vivid picture has been haunting me to this day, and I always wondered whether the woman felt the bullets hitting into her flesh. This sight made me gain strength, as I knew if I gave up I would be shot.

After walking for approximately 75 miles, we were put into open wagons at a railway station, which took us to Weimar, and then another 10 miles' walk to Buchenwald concentration camp. In Buchenwald, we did not work, it is just as well, as every one of us was extremely weak from lack of food, and this was now almost 6 years of war, suffering and hunger. A piece of dry bread was regarded as a luxury, and so were potato peelings, let alone potatoes. If only we could have had plenty of either, we would have been very happy and thankful.

I was in Buchenwald until 8 April that year, namely 1945, when on that day we could hear the guns of the approaching of the Allied armies from the West. I must mention here that life in Buchenwald was similar to that in Auschwitz, except we did not work. We had to get up very early in the morning to attend the Appel (to be counted), we had

to stand in the freezing cold to be counted, until the number of prisoners agreed with that amount that was expected from the S.S. Again, we got a piece of dry bread around 7:00 A.M. then a bowl of soup at mid-day, and after that, nothing at all until the next morning.

The barracks was full of prisoners and we were all huddled together on hard bunks. The smell was unbearable. A lot of us were sick, and needless to say, some mornings we found ourselves waking up to dead bodies around us. It was all taken for granted, and the most important thing was that everyone thought of their own survival and how to achieve it. This sort of situation went on until the 8th of April, 1945, when the American army was approaching from the west. The S.S. in the camp started to retreat, but instead of leaving us prisoners to be liberated from this hell, they rounded up around 5,000 of us (I was included), and made us retreat with them. Firstly, we walked for ten miles to Weimar rail station, and the same principle applied, namely, anyone who dropped out with exhaustion was shot dead. Naturally, this fate happened to numerous of us in the transport. Little did we know that the next four weeks would turn out to be the worst time of the six years of our suffering, with the chance of dying increased tremendously.

So, on that fateful early April day, we were put on to a train of cattle wagons which were completely open, approximately 150 people to a wagon, and started proceeding in a south-easterly direction towards the Czech. border. The wagon I was in consisted mostly of boys my age (16-17 years old), and there were so many of us we were almost laying on top of one another. We did not mind that, as it was very cold, and we sort of huddled together to try and keep warm. On every wagon there sat on top an S.S. guard, and one wagon held a contingent of S.S. guards.

It was cold and dark (night-time), snow was covering us, and this was especially bad for those who were laying on top of the other boys. Most of us were groaning and crying, as we were all laying on top of one another, in a very uncomfortable and awkward position. One incident I clearly remember nearly cost me my life, namely, I was apparently squashing one of the boys (truly, we were squashed like sardines in a tin), and he was shouting so much for me to get off, but I could not move anywhere. Suddenly, I felt this tremendous pain in my back.

apparently stuck a needle into me, and I felt blood on my hands, and passed out. This episode did not help me much, as the combination of the cold, the blood and the pain made me feel very ill. I must at this point emphasise that since we left Buchenwald, (it was now some thirty hours later), we had been given neither food nor water, and as a result, there were already many dead. After having travelled all night, the train stopped - in the middle of "nowhere" - and thankfully, we were all ordered out of the wagon, which almost seemed like heaven. The Germans surrounded the whole train - and us - and we were allowed to get water from a stream, light fires, and cook grass and any other vegetation we could find. This kept us barely alive, although grass, cooked in unsalted water, tasted awful. Nevertheless, we ate same in order to survive. We also baked wood and ate same in order to contain the hunger. We stopped in this place for around seven days, and naturally, the death toll was beginning to mount.

Every evening, we were ordered back to the wagon, and at daylight, we were ordered out again. Every morning, the S.S. who guarded each wagon were asked by another guard: "Wie viele tote haben sie?", which means: "How many dead have you got today?" All the dead were gathered into empty wagons, (the Germans obviously anticipated that such a situation would arise) and naturally, we, the prisoners, had to do the dirty work.

I really can't begin to describe the state of these bodies, it was an awful sight, and I don't think I could be strong enough now to take in such a sight.

One evening, after we were ordered back into the wagons, the train commenced to roll, and we were travelling continuously all night, but to our surprise, when we stopped the next morning, we were back at the same spot where we had started from. It then became obvious to us that the Germans did not know where they were going. Once again, it was back to the previous routine of looking for bits of anything that we could either eat or chew. We stayed at that spot for at least two weeks, and each day on, there were more dead bodies. No wonder - lack of food, and most of all, shelter from the bad weather. We had no way of sheltering from the rain and snow, except to crawl under the wagon, which a few of us did, but there was not enough room to accommodate each one of us. At times like these, our

main wish was to have a roof over our heads, and enough dry bread to eat. A piece of dry bread, and a potato peeling, if it were to be found, was a luxury.

By this time, it was late April, 1945 and the number of prisoners was beginning to dwindle - no wonder at it, considering the conditions we had to endure. Even the S.S. guards were beginning to look tired, fed up, and ill, and we ourselves were getting weaker and weaker, and were wondering if we should ever survive this hell. We were all very hungry and weak, in fact, so weak that I myself could hardly sniff up, and to no surprise a great number of my colleagues in fact died.

At one point, I did not realise, but I was actually lying on dead bodies all night, which in the morning were transferred to the wagon of the dead, which I mentioned earlier.

There were lots of horrific incidents which I could describe here, but one which outstands most, is of a prisoner (who I believe was Russian), who started cutting flesh from a dead body, and had started to eat same as he was so desperately hungry. The S.S. guard noticed same, took off his machine gun, and started pumping bullets into the prisoner with blood spraying everywhere, and the S.S. guard shouting at the prisoner: "Du verfluchter hund - Menschenfleisch willst du fressen!" which means: "You damned dog - human flesh will you eat!" This episode will live with me forever.

We were now into the first week of May, 1945, and the train had now crossed the Czech border, still heading south-east, when eventually, on May 8th, we came to a stop into a siding, we were there for a few hours, and all of a sudden, we realised that all the German guards had disappeared. By this time, I realised that my life, what was left in me, was ebbing away. I was delirious, and very feverish. I could vaguely remember being in some kind of makeshift hospital, where I was thoroughly bathed (my body had not been washed for months), and put into a bed. I passed out, and when I came to, I was told that I am lucky to be alive, as I survived a high temperature which is peculiar to typhus. It gradually became known to me that the train I was on had ended up at Terezin, near Prague, Czechoslovakia.

The town had been liberated by the Russian army. That's why we could no longer see the German guards. I was very, very weak and although I was given food, none of us could keep it down. Our stomachs were shrunk through lack of food for six years, and especially for the last four weeks. I myself weighed in at 5½ stones, and I was seventeen years old.

We were told to go easy on the food, and it was a question of discipline in consuming the foods available. As a result, it was very distressing to see many of my friends die from simply eating, having survived the six years of terrible experiences, concentration camps, etc.

My colleagues and myself were looked after from May 1945 'til August, 1945, until we gradually gained weight, and our general health improved, when on 15th August, 1945 a whole transport of about 300 were flown to England to a new life.

David Kutner