Three Hungarian Jews recall their internment in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Hungary

The Austro-Hungarian Empire, allied with Kaiser Wilhelm II's German Empire, formed the core of the Central Powers during the First World War. Afterwards, the victorious allies (France, Italy, the US, and Great Britain) redrew the map of Europe with the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and the Treaty of Trianon (1920), greatly reducing in size of both Austria and Hungary. Austria lost all of the lands it had once ruled. Hungary lost two-thirds of its land to Romania, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

Hungary's interwar autocratic government tried to steer a path of collaboration with Nazi Germany yet maintain at least a measure of independence. That is why its 600,000 Jews were, relative to its neighbors, marginally protected until March 1944, when Germany occupied Hungary.

In a matter of weeks, and with the full cooperation of the Hungarian police, army, and government, the Germans SS, headed by Adolf Eichmann, rounded up 437,408 Jews and sent them directly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Very few returned.

At war's end, some one hundred thousand Jews emerged from the infamous Budapest Ghetto or returned from the camps and labor brigades. Tens of thousands left in the decades after, yet more Jews live in Budapest today than in all the rest of Central Europe combined.

Our team in Budapest, headed by Eszter Andor and Dora Sardi, interviewed one hundred seventy-five Jews still living in Hungary, and digitized over forty-seven hundred old pictures and documents. We translated forty-five of these interviews into English and they can be found here.

Well more than seventy of our Hungarian interviewees survived the hell of Auschwitz, and we have chosen to share with you the stories of Eva Vara, Lilly Lovenberg, and Ference Leicht.

Special thanks to Tamar Aizenberg for editing these stories, as well as Lauren Granite.

Lilly Lovenberg

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Ildiko Makra
Date of interview: May 2004

CLICK HERE to read Lilly Lovenberg's Centropa interview

CLICK HERE to see Lilly Lovenberg's family photos

Lilly Lovenberg was born on January 1, 1918, in Hetyen, Hungary (today Ukraine). She grew up in Hetyen with her parents, Jakab and Maria Rosenberg, and her five siblings. Aside from Lilly, the only other family member to survive the Holocaust was her brother Gyula. Growing up, Lilly attended a Calvinist school, where she enjoyed studying math and history. Lilly described her family as religious, as they kept kosher and celebrated Jewish holidays. Before the deportations began Lilly had finished her schooling and was teaching tailoring lessons.

But in April 1944, Lilly and her family were forcibly taken to the Beregszaz ghetto, where they remained for a month. Then, from April 30, 1944, until May 2, 1944, Lilly and her family were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Soon after her arrival in the camp, Lilly was assigned to work in the Kanada barracks, which involved sorting through clothing stolen from the Jews who arrived at the camp. She also worked in a potato storing facility. Toward the end of the war, Lilly was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany, and was liberated exactly one year after her arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, on May 2, 1945.

After the war, Lilly returned to Hungary. She married Lajos Lovenberg, had three children, and worked for many years as an accountant at a gas company. At the time of the interview, Lilly was retired and enjoyed spending time with her children and grandchildren.

On April 30, 1944, they transported us from the ghetto, and on May 2, we arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The train stopped along the way, but we couldn't get out. We just stayed in the boxcars the whole time. The little window in the boxcar was barbwired, and we peeked out of there. Some died along the way. They threw them out.

They told us they were taking us to work and that the old people would receive special treatment. They didn't say where, just that it was in Germany. They didn't tell us anything; they just treated us like animals.

Everybody was in the boxcars together, but when we arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau and got off the train, they separated the women from the men. My parents, Moric [her brother], Erzebet [her sister], and I were together. At Kassa [city on the Hungarian-Slovak border], when the Hungarian constables turned us over to the Germans, we had to give up our belongings. We had actually already been told in the ghetto that we would have to give up any gold, jewelry, or other valuables. I had to leave my watch.

They said everything to us in German. But we understood; my parents spoke German fluently. And for those who didn't understand, someone translated for them.

I also remember that my brother, Moric, said, "Whatever happens, Lilly is going to survive."

When we arrived in Auschwitz, the people in striped clothes, who had already been there for a long time, from Slovakia and Germany, waved at us not to bring anything in. The German guards yelled at us in German, "Men together her; women together there." When we had been separated, they yelled for the women over sixty to step aside and a German SS [man] pointed in which direction! That's when we were separated from each other. At the time, we thought we would be able to visit one another. The Jickovics girls, three sisters who were also from Hetyen, were there with us the whole time. Their mother went together with ours. But we decided that Erzebet, my older sister, would go with the older women to take care of them. Then they took us into the shower, and we had to take off our clothes. The older residents [the prisoners] started staring at our clothing and came to take them. I said, "Don't touch them, they are mine!" The prisoners had a good laugh and then took them. Instead, we also got a full-length gray dress, big clothes, knickers, stockings, and a pair of socks.

Then they shaved us bald. When we had seen the bald prisoners upon arrival we had said, "How they look!" We thought they were crazy. They told us, "Just wait—soon you'll be crazy, too." And then it was our turn. When we came out, we didn't recognize each other. We looked around to see who was where; everyone had totally different faces.

As we moved, I heard somebody yelling, "Lilly, Lilly!" My sister came over to me with a loaf of bread in her hand, the baked kind from home. "What did you do? How could you leave Mother?" I asked her. She said, "I didn't want to, but the Germans wouldn't let me go, they beat me back with a rubber club." I asked, "And why did you take the bread from Mother?" and she responded, "He [a German] took it from her and gave it to me." Erzebet survived the camps. She died on the way home, but I'll get to that later.

The first day, when we had to stand for the *Zellappell* [German: "roll call"] at 4am, the fun had already started. That's when they counted us. I had gotten two socks. One was a really warm stocking, which came up to my thigh, and the other was a short sock. And bald, in the cold of dawn, I tied a turban on my head, so I wouldn't freeze. When an SS guard came to me, he slapped me so hard I thought my head had fallen off. "What are you thinking? You have a turban on!" He took it off my head. I had no idea it wasn't allowed. Such a hard slap on the first day for me!

When we arrived, they gave us bread—I thought it was homemade soap, that's how little like bread it looked. That's what we had, plus some margarine and a half-liter of soup. It looked like the slop they used to give to the pigs at our neighbor's house in Hetyen. There were potatoes in it. And for dinner we got a cup of black coffee. Every day we got the same thing, no variation.

You had to save your bread. I always went out to the trash heap and collected the vegetables that the kitchen had thrown away. We washed them well, and in a tin can on two bricks, we cooked what we had found inside the barrack. There was a place in the middle of the barrack for that.

Our barrack commander, Alizka had been there for four years and was a Slovak Jew. The barrack commanders were sometimes Jewish, but they weren't just Jews, there were also Ukrainians. There were those who had been convicted of something. There were Communists and German prostitutes. They worked in the camp as overseers. There were robbers and killers, too. Every three months, they put the people who worked at the crematorium into the crematorium so there wouldn't be anybody to talk about what happened there.

Erzsebet's condition was weaker than mine. They often took her to the hospital, where she got a little better but soon broke down again, and they took her in again. Once they whispered behind me that yesterday there was a big selection at the hospital, and my sister was one of the selected. That night I escaped to the hospital and found my sister still alive.

In the beginning, we didn't know anything about our family members. We found out from Alizka about three weeks later that our parents were no longer alive. Alizka had

yelled at us to be silent. There were 800 of us in one barrack, and so there was a lot of noise. To punish us for being noisy, she told us to remember where we were, and that our parents had been cremated the day we arrived. We had always seen the big fires. They didn't bury people here; they burned them. We didn't think we would end up there.

They only took Jews and gypsies [Roma/Sinti] to the crematorium. The gypsies worked in the neighboring barrack, and one day no gypsies came out, not even one. They said that they had cremated 3,500 gypsies that night. It was horrific. When we found out they had cremated the gypsies, we didn't know who would be next in line and we panicked.

They put us in the group called Kanada. This meant that we sorted the clothes taken from the transports of Jews. The better items had to be packed separately. The underwear and everything had to be separated. It wasn't hard work and we got the very nice clothes, when they were striped, such as grey and blue stripes and a blue silk belt. We had red scarves on our heads, and everything was brand new. We got black boots that we had to shine every day. We had to march nicely because the international express train passed by our workspace. We went to work next to where the train went by, so foreigners saw what great things the prisoners were doing. That lasted only six weeks because then the transports from Hungary ended. And our jobs were done; Kanada was shut down.

Then they put us to work cleaning up ruins. We had to dig out the rocks with a pick-axe from the dilapidated and bombed houses. It was horribly difficult work. We had to load the big rocks into a coal tub. When the tub was full, eighteen to twenty of us pulled it by the thick ropes attached to the side. We had to transport that for I don't know how many meters. After we'd dumped it, we had to put the stones in nice piles. After we made the piles, we pulled the coal tub back and started the work again. That went on for a while. Then they put us in potato loading: loading train cars full of potatoes for soldiers.

Since I was the daughter of a landowner, I knew how to store potatoes. We took 50-kilogram (approx. 110 pound) crates over to the railway, to the warehouse. Once, somebody hid four potatoes. One of the SS [women] carried a mace with a ball on the top like the swineherds used to have. I wasn't there, because my sister was in the hospital then. I had just gotten back, when everybody was standing there with their skirts up, and she'd beaten their bottoms. Everybody got clubbed eight times. She told me to stand in line! I got them too, but with full force. Those who got it first, she hit with her full anger. Our behinds were blackened. Then we looked at each other to see how badly our bottoms had been beaten and saw that the Germans were looking. One of them said to the SS woman, "How could you beat

them like that, they're women." And when our shift was over, the more sensitive one came over to us and said, "Everybody can take four potatoes, but hide them, so they don't see them at the entrance." That's how they compensated us for the beating.

Once, we were next to a cabbage field around noon near where we worked. There the girls ran in, one, then another, and got out a cabbage, and ran back. I was so scared, I didn't dare. I saw the guard there; he was aiming at me. I called out to him in German to let me take a cabbage. Not possible. But what did he do? He turned around, turned his back to me. I understood that he didn't want to see anything. I pulled one out, and my friend pulled out two. My sister had sent word from the hospital to bring her some kind of vitamins, such as a little cabbage leaf. That's why I took the cabbage.

I barely stood up when I heard an SS guard on a horse galloping towards us, and poor Nelli started to run with two cabbages. She shouldn't have run away. I didn't run away. I stood petrified, let the cabbage drop from my hand, and waited. When he got there, he jumped off the horse, put the reins in my hand and jumped on Nelli. Well, Nelli in her wood clogs, and pipe-cleaner thin legs, got it. He hit her with the highest degree of sadism, kicked her, cut her, crushed her, and humiliated her, "*Die Schweine Juden!* [German: "the pig-Jews"] A German officer says stop, and you dare run away!" He left her there; Nelli had pissed and soiled herself. Everything came out of her. The German took down our numbers and said that we were going to go to court because it was forbidden to steal cabbage. What upset me was that the others who had also taken cabbages had fled and made it.

Three days later, they called us to the court. The woman judge addressed me to tell her what happened. I told her that my sister was in the hospital, and I wanted to bring her some vitamins, a little cabbage leaf. That's why I pulled out the cabbage. "And the guard?" she asked. I said, "I didn't see him, he was standing with his back to us. And that's why I dared to pick the cabbage." The woman judge liked the fact that I didn't get the guard involved.

Nonetheless, I was sent to the punishment barrack and my sister Erzebet stayed in the other barrack. There was food in the punishment barracks. They had milk and boiled potatoes. I took some milk to my sister because they gave us the best of what they cooked. The workers just got the scraps. Those who were punished were long-time prisoners already. There were Jews, Ukrainians, and also high-ranking ones there. They had connections with the kitchen.

We had been in Auschwitz-Birkenau for six months when we suddenly heard that they were taking prisoners to Germany. The order came that nobody could leave the

barracks after dark. Trucks were coming and we had to get on them. There was lots of screaming in the punishment barrack when we heard this.

When the barrack was half empty, the barrack commander came over holding a little girl by the hand who was maybe sixteen years old. She told me, "You and Nelli come with me." She took us to the empty part in the back. She said, "Hide in here, in one of the beds farthest in the back, on top, in the hollow of the bed. The sound of a fly is not loud, but don't even make that much noise. I'll come back for you!" We got in and waited in silence. Suddenly, the barrack emptied out. There was a horribly great silence. You can't imagine what that terrifying silence was like. We stayed there, covered up. I heard an SS officer asking the commander woman, "All 800 are gone?" In German, she said, "Yes." The officer left, and the woman came over to us with tears streaming down her face, "So now you can come out. Come out, that's all I can do." I didn't understand what she meant by that. We followed her. "And where do we go?" we asked. "Wherever you want," and she left.

Only later did I find out that we were the only three who survived that night, out of 800. The others were all killed that night.

After that, I went looking for my sister in the barrack I'd been banished from. It was completely empty. I started to ask around and they said, "They're over there, crammed together, two barracks worth of prisoners in one, like herrings. A train is taking them in the morning." And so I went over there, and good Lord! The guard, who was a prisoner too, didn't want to let me into the barrack where my sister was. I showed him my number and told him to look for my sister. I told him that she was in there and that I had been left behind. He let me in. I screamed out her name and found her. She was squashed. I almost passed out from the horrible smell in there. Then, in the morning, we had to leave Auschwitz-Birkenau. They gave us two slices of bread each for the trip. And we had a backpack, which I saved. It's in the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel.

We thought they were taking us to Germany. We didn't know what day it was. We had to walk to the trains for nearly two days straight. Then we had to stop because there weren't any more trains. They had to give them to the army. So, they put us in a giant tent and one thousand of us slept on the bare ground. They brought us soup, but it was so salty that we couldn't eat it.

Then, two or three days later, a train came and took us to Ravensbrück [concentration camp near Fürstenberg, Germany].

Eva Vari

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Dora Sardi
Date of interview: January 2004

CLICK HERE to read Eva Vari's Centropa interview

CLICK HERE to see Eva Vari's family photos

Eva Vari was born in 1924 in Budapest, Hungary, to Miksa and Margit Hochberger. Her parents divorced when she was still a baby and her mother took her to the city of Debrecen, where she grew up with her maternal grandparents and her stepfather, Laszlo Ladanyi. Eva went to Jewish primary and middle schools in Miskolc.

After graduating middle school, Eva enrolled in a women's trade school where she studied art history, sewing, and tailoring. Although she successfully completed her degree, she graduated in 1942 and, as a Jew, was unable to find employment. When Eva was twenty years old in 1944, she and her mother (her stepfather was already in a forced labor camp) were deported to a ghetto. From there, they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, and then to Wiener Neustadt (a city south of Vienna). Eva recalls the horrific conditions that she and the other inmates lived in as well as her work packing grenades for the German army.

In the spring of 1945, Eva and her mother were liberated by the US Army. They returned to Budapest and Eva married, raised three children, and worked in a plastics cooperative until her retirement

Toward the end of May 1944, the Nazis consolidated the ghetto and deported us to work in a brick factory. We lived in terrible conditions, all on top of each other. Soon afterwards, the SS packed us into wagons and took us to Auschwitz-Birkenau in cattle trucks. I was still with my grandparents and my mother. If I remember correctly, we had poppyseed rolls with us and we had to ration them out.

When we got to Auschwitz-Birkenau, they took us out of the cattle trucks and we had to leave everything we had saved, including our food. We were selected to go left or right. They sent my grandfather right first. My last image of him is as he turned back and said, "Look after your mother." And then I was there with my mother and grandmother. Then my grandmother was also sent to the right and that was the last time I saw her. But I was with my mother until the end. If she hadn't been there, I would never have survived.

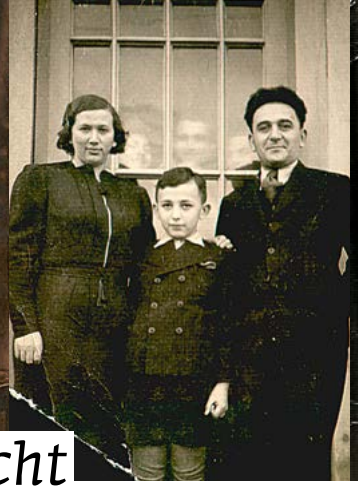
They herded us into a big space—it was June already, the sun shone beautifully, I remember—and they shaved us everywhere. I remember my mother and I exchanged glances, and we started to laugh because we looked so awful. Then we had to strip naked and they took us to the showers. We didn't know then that it could be a real shower or a gas shower. We got no towel, no nothing. We went in single file, and after the shower, there was a big pile of rags that they called clothes, and we took whatever we could.

After the showers we entered the extermination camp. There were barracks that housed about 1000-1200 people at a time. The barracks had no bunks or blankets, only the bare earth. You could only lie down when the feet of the person next to you were next to your shoulders, and your feet were next to their shoulders. And if someone wanted to turn over then the whole line of people lying down had to, as there was not even enough space for that.

I spent three-and-a-half months there, which was about from the end of June until mid-October. Sometimes the Nazis came to look at us, supposedly because they took the prettier women to brothels. When the Nazis came and we knew there would be a selection, we had to hide. And sometimes they took people for work. My mother always stood four or five spots behind me, so that if they did not choose me, she would sneak out, and if they chose me and not her, then she would swap with me.

I remember the last selection was on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. By this point, the camp was pretty empty. And they chose us. My mother said, "It's awful here but we've gotten used to it. Shouldn't we stay here?" And I said, "Mom, they didn't choose us before but now they have, so let's go." So, we went. Not one of those who stayed back survived.

They took us to Bergen-Belsen, which was a holiday compared to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There were tents with straw on the floor and we received two blankets per person. The blankets were especially important because it was very cold then. Four or five of us would huddle together under one blanket for warmth, then cover ourselves with the remaining blankets, as well. The food in Bergen-Belsen was also better. After all, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the food was not really food—it tasted like plain cooked grass. So, Bergen-Belsen was more manageable.


Ferenc Leicht

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Judit Rez
Date of interview: June–November 2004

CLICK HERE to read Ferenc Leicht's Centropa interview

CLICK HERE to see Ferenc Leicht's family photos

Ferenc Leicht was born in 1929 in Keszethely, Hungary, and grew up in Nagykanizsa, a town in southwest Hungary. He lived with his parents and his great-grandmothers, both of whom raised him until they passed away. Ferenc's father owned a bakery and according to Ferenc, his father was "the best baker in Nagykanizsa." By the age of five, Ferenc was a voracious reader and would read almost any book he could find. Ferenc describes his childhood as not particularly religious, although he attended a Jewish elementary school and often went to synagogue on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. At his public middle school, Ferenc regularly experienced antisemitism—in fact, he explains that most of his teachers were outwardly antisemitic.

Ferenc had completed his first year at a commercial college when the Germans marched into his hometown on March 19, 1944. Within a couple of days, all Jews had to wear yellow stars and were not permitted to leave their homes. On April 29, 1944, Ferenc and his mother were deported to Auschwitz, where he worked in a chemical factory.

He was liberated by the Soviet army on January 27, 1945, eventually returning to Hungary, where he was reunited with his parents and several other family members. After completing high school, Ferenc moved to Israel for two-and-a-half years before returning to Hungary, joining the army, working as a technician, marrying, and raising two children.

It was May 2, 1944. Through the holes in the train, we could see that people in striped clothes were taking apart wrecked airplanes and we had no idea that we would ever have to do anything like that. Then the people in the striped clothes opened the train cars and started shouting at us to leave everything in the cars and immediately get off the train. They even climbed onto the train to make us hurry.

In Yiddish, a person in striped clothes asked me how old I was. I spoke no Yiddish. However, my German was excellent, and since the languages are so similar, I understood him. So, I responded that I was fifteen. Then he told me, "Say that you're seventeen." Fortunately, I understood this, too.

When we got off the train, we had to line up five by five. I held my mother's hand from one side, my aunt's hand from the other, and she held her husband's hand, my Uncle Eisinger, on the other side. We walked along nice and slowly in these rows of five. Although the SS guards didn't make us hurry, it was clear we were in a dangerous situation. And then we arrived in front of an elegant German officer. Interestingly, he was very polite. He said to my mother very politely: *"Gnädige Frau, können Sie laufen?"* [German: "Dear lady, can you run?"] My mother didn't understand a word of German, so she didn't understand the question. She asked me, "What is he saying, what is he saying, what did he ask?" I translated it for her.

Then he said we had to part temporarily. "Ladies, please step to the left, men please step to the right." I did not see them again until after the war. I went with my Uncle Eisinger, and they assigned us both to work. I later found out that my mother and aunt had been assigned to work, too.

We had arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Birkenau was huge—it was something like two square kilometers (approx. 0.8 square miles). Next to the camp there was a huge IG Farben factory. Only about 1,300 of the 4,000 people on my transport were assigned to work—the others were gassed immediately upon arrival in Birkenau.

They put about 400 of us on trucks and took us to a camp that was five kilometers away and belonged to IG. On *Lagerstrasse* [German: "camp street"], the main road in the middle of the camp, they lined us up five by five. Then we were taken to the disinfecting room.

As we walked to the disinfecting room, the other prisoners shouted at us to throw them everything we had because they were going to take it from us anyways. We didn't listen because we had no idea whether they would take it or not. We didn't know what to think. But I didn't have anything valuable on me. And the prisoners were right—when we got there, they took off everyone's clothes. I was wearing a

winter coat, a nice pair of ski boots, even though I didn't ski, trousers, and a pair of mittens. They took everything, even my underwear.

I was also wearing my school cap. I really didn't want them to take it, though I only realized later why I cared so much about this hat. This hat represented my identity. It showed that I belonged to my school, to Nagykanizsa, and to Hungary. But they took it by force, and I started bawling.

This was an important moment for me. At that moment, I realized that I wasn't Hungarian, after all, even though I felt and thought so. I realized that the way I lived and thought wasn't real, and that I had to face that I belonged to another ethnic group. My homeland didn't love me—it had handed me over to the Germans who stripped me of my clothes and cut my hair until I was bald. And since they robbed me of my Hungarian identity, I didn't try to be in Hungarian company at the camp. I mostly made friends with Polish, Greek, French, and German Jews.

Also, after I had had a good cry when they took my cap, and after I had experienced what my life in the camp was like, then I focused on starving as little as possible, not being very cold, and avoiding beatings. It didn't matter to me anymore whether I would be liberated or would die or even what happened to my family. Because, how should I put it, one couldn't do anything with these thoughts.

I will feel ashamed about these thoughts forever and I will never forgive the Germans for making me have these thoughts. I mean that if I would have tried and survived for a couple years, then I would have become a foreman, perhaps. In essence, imagined a *Lager* career for myself, and thought about nothing else outside of the *Lager*, apart from the fact that I could have died any time. How should I say it? Life outside of the *Lager* wasn't a topic in itself. Whoever lived, lived; whoever died, died.

Anyways, after taking my cap, they took us to a shower, where there was cold water for only about two and a half seconds; everyone had to shower quickly. Then we ran to a barrack, where we were each given a pair of underwear, a shirt, striped pants, and a striped jacket. Nothing else. We didn't get any shoes, but they did take ours.

They lined us all up—400 barefoot men. An SS guard came and asked, "Where are your shoes?" It turned out that they had forgotten to order wooden shoes for so many people and had only ordered clothes. He beat up the prisoner who was responsible for this in front of us, and then he said that everyone should put on the shoes that he arrived in.

My former schoolmate, Gyuri Nandor, took my ski boots right in front of me. I was very angry, but I got a pair of slightly smaller, newer boots. There were all kinds of

shoes, good ones, bad ones, boots, and everyone took whatever he could lay his hands on. I got some leather boots, which were truly life-saving. Those who didn't have leather shoes got wooden shoes, and very few of these prisoners survived.

We also got tattooed. I got number 186889. I got very exasperated at the thought of being tattooed; I am not a cow, after all. But the prisoner who tattooed me told me that I should actually be grateful for the tattoo. Those who weren't tattooed were sent to the gas chamber more often than those who were tattooed because the tattoo indicated that one was working and therefore more useful.

We lined up again and they took us to the quarantine block, which was block number 44. There were 56 blocks, the auxiliary buildings, the showers, and the toilets. In block 44 there wasn't a bathroom or toilet. Nonetheless, since this was a labor camp, the conditions were good compared to those in Auschwitz proper. IG had a huge thermal station and the *Lager* got its used water for heating. Every barrack had central heating, which was very good in the winter, though unfortunately the bedbugs liked it very much, too. The barracks were extremely buggy in both summer and winter.

Soon after we arrived in the camp, they made us write a pre-printed German postcard. It said, "I am in Waldsee,"—a resort in Switzerland—"I am fine, greetings to everyone." We could sign, address it, and send it home. Even those who ended up in the gas chamber five minutes later had to write it.

I wrote my Waldsee card to one of my neighbors who lived in Nagykanizsa next to our bakery. My mother wrote to the same neighbors, I later found out. These neighbors knew my father's address in the forced labor camp, and they sent him both of our postcards.

In the Auschwitz *Stammlager* [German: "main camp"] they brought out these letters one day at roll call and distributed them. My mother got my father's reply. I actually don't know of anyone else besides her who got a reply because most people's relatives had been murdered by then. My father wrote that everything was alright and that I had also written to him. That's how my mother learned that I was still alive. I also soon knew that my mother was alive somewhere. Even though it was strictly forbidden to send word from one camp to the other, and they hung those who did it, news still spread. After all, the route from the women's camp to their place of work passed by the men's camp, so the women knew there was a men's camp.

The route way to work also crossed the Krakow-Auschwitz main road. One time, a brave woman dropped a paper ball, and an even braver man bent down and picked

it up. He brought the paper to the *Lager* and it went around. It was a list of names written in Hungarian and I recognized my aunt's handwriting. It said that Erzsebet Eisinger and Terez Leicht were looking for Jeno Eisinger and Ferenc Leicht. So, I knew that they were alive. But the fact that someone was alive in August in one moment didn't mean much, because that could change any minute.

Anyways, during the first two weeks in the camp they didn't do anything but teach us how to line up for roll call. They were obsessed with roll call. The roll call took a very long time because it involved counting about 10,000 people, and until everyone had been counted, we all had to remain standing. They added that if we saw a German, we had to take off our cap five steps before meeting him, and after five steps we had to walk past him in stand-to, however faint we felt.

They were also obsessed with the way we ate our food. There wasn't any cutlery. They told us that everyone was supposed to get a quarter of a loaf of bread every day and half a loaf twice a week. They made it out of sawdust, bran, and who knows what else. It was terrible, but when one was hungry, it became good. They also said that we would only get the *Zulage*, the additional food, if we worked. This meant a spoonful of so-called "Hitler bacon," that is, marmalade. If not marmalade, then black pudding, and if not black pudding, then margarine. They gave us half a liter of coffee every morning, made of caffeine substitute, of course. They strictly forbid drinking water. We were allowed to wash, but not to drink. It was written on huge signs that "a sip of water could cost your life."

We also got soup. It was called *buna* soup and made of turnip tops and nettles cooked in water. It was warm and very bad. It was tasteless but we ate it with our leftover bread. And after a while we didn't get *buna* soup, because the Kapos [inmates appointed by the SS to be in charge of a group of workers] regularly exchanged their cigarettes with the prisoners of war for the much thicker and better soup that they got, so we got so-called *Engländer-Suppe* [English soup].

So, at noon we got that soup and, in the evening when we went back to the camp, we got the so-called *Abend-Suppe* [German: "evening soup"], which was perhaps a little bit better. Sometimes there was some potato in it, which was a big luxury. And this was the food. After four months of eating this food, one became nothing but skin and bones. These people were called "*Muselmänner* (the term given to those who had lost so much weight they seemed destined to die).

If someone did a good job at work and was friends with the Kapos, one could buy cigarettes, Majorca tobacco, pickled cabbage, and mustard. Out of the 500 people in commando no. 90 nobody ever was able to do this. The main Kapo would buy cigarettes to exchange with the English prisoners of war.

At dawn, when it was still dark, we were woken by a bell. The first thing we had to do was make the beds. There were three beds per bunk, about 80 bunk beds in a barrack, and about 240 prisoners living in a barrack. Each bed had a straw mattress, a pillow filled with straw, and a blanket. Usually everyone had his or her own bed.

When we were finished with making the beds, shoe polishing was next. For some unknown reason, all shoes, including the wooden ones, had to be polished with cart grease. There were always three or four boxes of grease that everyone tried to grab. Of course, we didn't have any handkerchiefs or rags. Some smeared the grease with the bottom of their shirt; I smeared it with the side of my hat. The hat was actually quite useful because one could use it for everything. There wasn't any toilet paper, either, and people tore off a little bit from the bottom of their shirt, and then threw the little piece away. Over time a long shirt became very short.

After cleaning our shoes, we got breakfast. Once everyone got his food there was roll call right away. Before marching to work, they counted everyone in front of the barrack. And, then they counted us again at the gate. Once they had counted us, we had to stand there and eat breakfast. Those who couldn't eat their food—that was their problem. Our clothing had no pockets to save food for later, so if one wanted to save the food, one had to position it creatively so it wouldn't fall. We either ate the marmalade or cut the bread and put the marmalade between the two pieces and held the bread with our shirt, pressing it with the sleeve of our jacket.

After they counted us at the barrack, we set off, walking in step in rows of five to be counted again at the gate. To ensure that we walked in step, there was a band with eight or ten musicians who happened to be gypsies [Sinti/Roma]. The band was called Music Kapo and there was a trumpet player, a cymbalist, a small drummer, and a big drummer. They played the best light opera tunes. They always marched in first, played in a small stand inside the gate, and then marched out last. They also worked just like everyone else, but they were extra careful that their fingers didn't get hurt.

On the way to work, the foremen, who helped the Kapos, would run next to us and in front of us and keep shouting "in straight lines!" This meant that we had to align ourselves with the line in front of us because they could only count the people easily by fives. Since the *Lager* was on the other side of the factory, they simply blocked the Krakow-Auschwitz main road with a chain of guards while we marched in and out. This chain of guards was made up of two rows of guards with rifles or submachine-guns and dogs.

Around noon we got a half-hour lunch break, and then we worked until dusk. The workday wasn't determined in hours; rather, it depended on the daylight because by the time it got dark everyone had to be in the camp. So, the winter workdays

were shorter than the summer workdays. When we marched back into the *Lager*, we marched again to music.

The schedule was so that we worked until noon on Saturdays, and we got the afternoons off, so we were in the *Lager*. We filled this time with louse control, cleaning, straw mattress filling, and so on. On most Sundays, we had to work but occasionally there were also so-called "free Sundays." We didn't have a social life, but rather we rested in the barrack and were happy to be alive. In fact, the 20th of August was a free Sunday, and the Americans, who never bombed Birkenau or the rails, attacked the IG Farben factory. They plastered the workshop where I worked with bombs and nothing remained of it.

When they assigned me to work, they transferred me to barrack 30. They assigned many young men there, because they thought that it was easy to turn young men into skilled laborers. I became a locksmith and worked with German civilians, English and American pilot prisoners of war, Polish and French volunteers, and civilians who had been brought there by force. I also worked with a couple of my acquaintances and friends.

Once the master didn't give me anything to do and I was slacking, so to speak. He snuck up behind me and beat me. He knew me by name, and said, "Franz, you know why you got this, don't you?" I said, "I know, because I wasn't working." He said, "No, not because of that. But because you weren't working, and you didn't notice that I was coming. What would have happened if an SS had come instead of me, what would have happened to you, what do you think?" He could have broken my arms and legs, because we were completely defenseless. But he told me this. What was I supposed to say?

Afterwards, I was assigned to work with the cables, but soon became desperate to be sent somewhere else to work. Laying cables was the most difficult work, and I said I would rather run against the wire fence than lay cables. I knew that I could endure this difficult work only for a couple of weeks and that they would select me for gassing.

One day, three of my schoolmates from Nagykanizsa grabbed me. They simply sat on me and told me that I shouldn't be stupid, that I would endure and they would, too. They said that I shouldn't be a fool; I should keep quiet. They sat on me for a half night. They saved my life but unfortunately none of them are alive anymore.

The next day they assigned new commandos and they sent me to the warehouse commando. This meant that I had to work in a warehouse. The warehouses were half-roofed, barn-like buildings that were open on the side. Somehow, they found

out that I could write and read German. So, they assigned me to the gas cylinder warehouse. I gave out the gas cylinders and kept a record of the number of cylinders each commando took. My physical labor involved loading cylinders. It was incredibly difficult work: a cylinder weighed about 80 kilograms (approx. 180 pounds) and I weighed only about 50 kilograms (approx. 110 pounds). Eventually, one of the workers there realized that it was stupid to lift them. We actually only had to tilt them a little bit and roll them.

Once, during the line-up for the march back from work, a submachine-gun of one of the mad SS guards discharged, probably not on purpose. Three bullets went into my right leg. I sat down and said, "Oh my God," and when we got to the camp, I went straight to the hospital. They treated my leg nicely, covered it with an ointment, and bandaged all three places with gauze, cotton, and
bandage-like crepe paper. Then they sent me back to the barrack, saying that I couldn't stay in the hospital. I said I didn't even want to stay there because I knew what was what already.

I went to work with my injured leg, I limped a little bit, but I still went. Since my work wasn't too straining—I only had to roll about 25 cylinders each day and I mostly sat and wrote—it didn't really affect me. But, nonetheless, the wound became infected and swollen. Then they told me that I had to go to the hospital, where they operated on my leg. I would have died if I hadn't done so—after all, people died of blood poisoning.

While I was at the hospital, they selected and gassed my Uncle Eisinger. Selections worked as follows: We had to march naked past the SS *Lager* head physician, Doctor Edmund König. When we marched past Doctor König, we had to tell him our number and he would check us off on his list of prisoners. Usually, 1000 people were selected each time. Those who were selected were gassed.

During one particular selection my uncle was in quite bad shape and we were afraid that he would be selected. He hid under a bed and I went past the doctor and said his number, which was different from mine. Then I jumped out of the window of the barrack, I ran while crouching down, climbed back into the barrack, and marched past again and told them my own number. This was a common tactic—the barrack commander even knew so—but he didn't mind. In fact, I got my aunt's husband through the selection twice this way. His job was particularly taxing, so he became a "*Muselmann*" very quickly.

But this time, there wasn't anyone to go through the selection instead of him since I was in the hospital. It was terrible, but I had to accept it. I accepted the German mentality: poor Eisinger, he was nothing but skin and bone. He would have suffered

for longer, but in the end, this would have happened to him, anyway. I felt sorry for him. I was sad but, at the same time, I understood the situation: this had to happen. I will never forgive myself for this, that I accepted this. This is an awful thing. And at the age of 15!

I knew one of the *Stubendienst* [inmate in charge of cleaning] at the hospital. We talked a lot. I could say that he was a pal. He might have been twice as old as I was, maybe about 25 or 30; he was a very decent German Jew. I told him that my leg wouldn't heal in two weeks. He told me that we would solve it.

And in two weeks there was selection, just as I expected. To my surprise, I passed. I asked the *Stubendienst* how this was possible, and he told me to go and ask the clerk. The clerk was a Belgian Jewish boy around 18 or 19 years old. He showed me that I had a brand new record. On the 13th day they threw my record out, and on paper they admitted me to the hospital again. They did this several times, I got injured sometime in the middle of November, and in January I was still at the hospital. But, unfortunately, I wasn't doing very well.

In the hospital, they changed my bandage every other day, covered my leg with ointment, and the swelling went down. When I could walk the *Stubendienst* put me to work helping him. I had to carry bed-slippers and help the new patients use them. At that time, they brought in a lot of non-Jews, and became suspicious about those who were French, though I don't know why.

One day the *Stubendienst* asked me if I wanted to get half a liter of soup more daily. Of course, I did. One was always hungry, especially because we didn't get the *Zulage* bread. He told me, "Here's a wire brush and some grease, and out there is the chimney for disinfecting." It was a huge iron chimney, about 10-12 meters tall, tied with cables, on a concrete ring put into the ground. They screwed it up, and the bolts were rusty. He gave me a wrench so that I would move the bolts, clean them, grease them and twist them repeatedly. This meant that I had to twist six bolts a day, and for this I got half a liter of soup. I was very happy about it. It was a very good job and though I only had a shirt and a pair of trousers at the hospital, they lent me a striped jacket so I wouldn't freeze outside while I did this work. I did it diligently until January 18th.

I only found out in 1998, at the first reunion of the former *Lager* inmates, why I had to do this work. I had to do it because the barrack commander substitute and some others planned that they wouldn't let everyone be killed. They thought that if the Russians came, then the Germans would have killed us all. These few people figured that since the 10-12 meter high disinfectant chimney was six meters away from the electric fence, they would blow it down on the fence to short-circuit and tear it

down, which would make it possible for us to run away in this situation. They made me do this job so that the bolts would be easy to screw off.

On January 18th, they evacuated the camp and they took those who could walk. But, at the time, we had already heard the Russian cannons for days. I also wanted to leave, and I asked for my clothes and shoes. The hospital put our clothes in a box with our numbers. I went to mine and it was empty. They had taken my clothes and my shoes. I stood there in a shirt and pants, and I said that I wanted to leave. They said, "No, not with this foot, Franz, you wouldn't get far. They will shoot you if you fall and your leg will get swollen again and then you won't be able to get help at any hospital and you will die." I was very desperate, because I was sure that they would kill those who remained in the hospital. The Germans didn't let those who couldn't work live.

But the Germans left on January 18th and they put a fist-sized lock on a thick chain on the gate of the *Lager*. The gates were locked and there were no guards around. The current was still in the fence, but the watchtowers were empty. There were only 740 people left in the camp: three barracks, a medical barrack, and two surgical barracks.

Everyone was scared to death, including myself. What would happen to us? They would surely kill us. They would set the barrack on fire. Or shoot us. This happened in the smaller camps and everyone died there. We didn't know about this at the time, but we knew the "local customs," so to speak. The front line was getting closer; they kept shooting. And one day the *Kraftwerk*, the electric plant in the factory stopped, the lights went off, and the heating stopped.

We were there for ten days and nights and we were quite hungry. We weren't thirsty because there was enough snow. In the meantime, the Russians kept bombing the *Lager*. We were lucky, because even though they set many barracks on fire, they didn't set any of the hospital barracks on fire. And we went to eat at the garbage-heap, which was next to the kitchen, and we ate the garbage that had been thrown out from the awful evening soup, which they couldn't use for anything in the kitchen. Beet stalks with mud, potato peels, things like these. We appreciated these much and ate them quickly, raw, as we found them.

When there was no power anymore, we cut up the wire fence at the back because there were some who knew that the potato pits were there. Then we could go out one by one and bring back potatoes. There were some who fell and froze to the ground when doing so. Whenever we went for potatoes, we always had to step over those who had died there. We had to eat the potatoes raw because there wasn't any fire, oven, or stove.

The Russians arrived on January 27, 1945. First, they only went into the factory. I saw their strange uniforms and heard them shooting wildly. By that evening, the German combat units had left the surroundings and the Russians liberated Birkenau, Auschwitz, and the prisoners in the hospital. Then we simply cut up the wire fence and those who could walk, including myself, helped some of our Russian-speaking comrades go out to talk to the Russian army.