1930-1945
CHILDHOOD

Up until the Second World War, Drohobycz, K's childhood home, was a well-kept town in southeast Poland with a sizable petroleum industry. Its over 30,000 population consisted of 15,000 Jews and 15,000 Poles with a small minority of Ukrainians. Antisemitism was not an acute problem for the Jewish community as was the case in Western Polish cities. Personally K, being a small child, did not remember antisemitic accidents. However, he did remember spending a lot of time with Polish children in the neighborhood. K was a cute and well-developed child with a happy childhood. He had a mother Rivka, father Abraham, brother Philp, Fafku for short, the oldest ten years older than K and a brother Herman, Hesio for short, five years older than K . When the war started, he was nine years old and was just about to start fourth grade. K's family was a middle class, warm Jewish family in south-eastern Poland. The father owned a textile store in the city's commercial part. The mother was as usual in those days a housewife. They had a live-in domestic help Marusia, a young Ukrainian woman from a nearby village, K's earliest childhood memories were always connected to Marusia. One of the early episodes happened in a bright spring morning day when K was three years old, a kid with an unusual verbal ability for three years old. There was the early morning commotion preparing Fafku and Hesio going to school. Both Rivka and Marusia very busy to help them dress, preparing breakfast and making sandwiches for school. K loved this early morning hustle and bustle, nobody paid much attention to him. On this particular spring day K watched the sunny outside and unnoticed by anybody, dressed only in a nightgown, decided to go for a solo walk in the streets of the city. He walked quite a while nearing the center of the town when eventually a policeman noted a toddler walking alone and took him to the police station, K wasn't scared and didn't cry. At the station he talked a lot and the present policemen had real fun conversing with a fast-talking toddler. At home they noted his absence after a while and panicked. It was K's mom Rivka who was coolheaded and run to the police station to report K's disappearing, only when she got there and saw K safe and sound did she break into tears.

K remembered his father as tall, little on the heavy side, with a full head of black hair. He seldom if ever played with K, never took him to a ball game, never attended parent-teacher interview. At the best he used to take K on High Holidays to the synagogue to which they belonged. In spite of all of this K's father was

loved and respected by his sons as the essential family member. He was there when needed, to take care of hard problems like taking K to a hospital when he was injured riding a sled or helping Fafku to be accepted by a prestigious university in the city of Lwow. He was there also to solve some trivial issues like fights between the boys. K's mother was the soul and the substance of the family, she was a loving person with empathy and compassion for family needs. K loved and adored his mother, one day when he was ten years old he was thinking about his parents he was surprised and scared that he loves his mother much more than his father.

World War II started on September 1, 1939 with Germany's treacherous attack on Poland. Within weeks, the Polish army was destroyed, and most of Poland was conquered. Three weeks after the war started the Germans entered Drohobycz, but it was not for long. According to the so-called Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement made in August 1939, Poland was to be divided. The eastern part of Poland was to be under the rule of the Soviet Union, and the western part to stay under German rule. And so it happened. On September 24, 1939, Drohobycz was transferred from German rule to the Soviet Union. This is how Drohobycz became part of Western Ukraine and as such a part of the Soviet Union. For the Jewish population, the transfer to the Soviet Union was a relief in comparison with what could be expected from German rule.

Life, as a part of the Soviet Union, was quite different for the adult population. However, for children, life continued normally. Schools were open, the new government paid a lot of attention to schools. Many new after-school programs were instituted. The occurred change, the school as a community with developed social contacts was very much to K's liking. He was proud to be in the communist Young Pioneer organization, which was similar to the scout movement in the Western countries. It also included socialistic indoctrination, contrary to the scout movement which was never controlled by a government or a political party. He was happy to wear his red tie and be an active member of the organization.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, and within eight days German troops entered Drohobycz. K's early childhood – nine years as a part of Poland and two years as a part the Soviet Union – were a happy childhood. Yet, it came to a sudden halt with the brutal German occupation. When the Germans entered Drohobycz, K was 11 years old and had just completed fifth grade. He was a good, if not outstanding, student. He was self-reliant, rather quiet, and never asked his parents for help in his studies. From his early years, he was a vivid

reader of novels. Robinson Crusoe was his very first book. He once overheard his mother talking to a friend. She said, "the little one, contrary to my other two boys, is no trouble at all. I hardly notice what he is doing."

## TRAGEDY IN DROHOBYCZ JULY 1941 - OCTOBER 1942

The Germans, upon entering Drohobycz from Day One, at 0 hours, declared loud and clear to the Jewish community that every single Jewish man, woman, child and infant were sentenced to death. Their declaration came in the form of numerous bloodbaths. Simultaneously, they published regulations stripping the Jews of any laws that may allow them to escape. Their policy was enforced by SS forces aided by local Ukrainians whose bestial behavior matched or was even worse than the SS. However, the Jewish population continued to exist owing to the need for manpower in the petrol industry. Though, thousands were killed or sent to extermination camps. Eventually, by the end of 1942, only a handful Jews were still working for the petroleum industry. K and his family continued to live in their apartment. His father and brothers worked in the oil industry, and as such, their lives were temporarily spared. But what kind of life was this?

It was a life in a horror movie turned into reality. K, now a 12-year-old boy, saw and listened to a reality that was strange and difficult to grasp, but he was aware that he and his family were exposed to death every single day. There was very little in their own hands. A monster in the form of SS soldiers in green were masters of death using various and unusual ways to kill.

From July 1941 - October 1942, the Germans used to arrange what the Jewish population called "actions." These were a kind of military operation in which they created groups of three to four SS men who went into areas of the Jewish population, broke into houses searching for people, arrested them, and led them to the rail station where the people were loaded into cattle rail cars. The multi-car train filled with people was designated to carry its human load to extermination camps. These were built by the Germans in many locations throughout Poland.

K's family life came to a sad close when his parents were arrested in one "action." K and both brothers survived this particular "action" as they were in a forest on the outskirts of Drohobycz. After the "action," K and his brothers, Fafku and Hesio, came home and kept quiet as if some higher force made them speechless. They were silent for a long time. The silence was the silence of grief. A silence of a loss never to be recovered. Eventually, the oldest Fafku – nine years

older than K – started to talk. He and K's middle brother Hesio were to leave the town and join a resistance organization. K was to stay in town in the apartment as long as possible, and K's brothers were to start intensively looking for a hiding place for him. It turned neither an easy nor expedient process.

In the meantime, local people noticed their apartment was empty and joyfully looted it. Thus, for safety reasons, K could not use it anymore. The new reality set in for K; he was homeless despite the fact that many of his relatives were still living nearby. Yet, this reality did not change his status as homeless. K moved to any home who welcomed him, but as it turned out, their welcome was very limited in time. K found himself sleeping every night in a different place. Sometimes he found himself in a bed and many times on floors. K also had to worry about food for himself. He had to find a place to spend the day, and he had to avoid “actions,” which were performed by the Germans every so often as long as some Jews were still living in town. One of K's brothers used to come, bringing some food and money. This kind of nomad life continued through the winter until the spring of 1943.

One day in March, K arrived at the home of uncle Smul, his mother Rivka’s brother. It was a family of five, Smul and his wife, their two children and his wife mother. In the afternoon, a neighbor came in with some information that an "action" was expected that night. After a while, K's uncle told him the family had to leave and go to a gentile friend who agreed to hide them. But unfortunately, the hiding place was very small, and they could not take him with them. K was faced with a brutal reality. It was late in the afternoon, he was in a large apartment by himself, and an “action” may start within hours. The night was coming fast. For the last few days, he had slept only a few hours. He had not showered for weeks; he felt soiled, tired, hungry, and desperate.

The apartment had a bedroom with a bed, blankets, and pillows – luxuries he didn't see for weeks. He had almost forgot they existed. “To hell with the Germans, Ukrainians, and all the other evil characters looming out there,” K thought as undressed, washed up, and went to bed for the first time in weeks in a clean bed.

He slept nonstop for 14 hours and the first rays of the next day’s sun woke him up. The "action" indeed started that night. Groups of SS soldiers moved into the Jewish section of the town, looking for people in their homes. But the Germans, based on previous experience were aware that during "actions" people did not stay in their apartments but used attics and basements hideouts. Germans indeed entered the house where K was sleeping, but they looked in basements

and attics and did not bother to enter any apartments. Even if they entered the apartment K wouldn't hear them and the Germans wouldn't see him as the last thing they would expect is somebody in bed.

That morning, his brother Fafku was worried what happened to K during the action and came into town to check on him. He entered the apartment, and to his huge surprise, he found K undressed in bed. He was not sure if he should hug or scold him. Should he hug him because K was alive or scold him because it was totally irresponsible to go to bed on a night of an "action"? However, deep inside him, he knew that if K had hidden in the basement or attic, he might have been found by the Germans.

But Fafku had good news that morning. He met a Polish woman, Ms. Labczynska, who was a deeply religious Protestant, and she was ready to provide a place of hiding for eight Jews. The number was her estimate of the conditions needed to provide basic living needs for those people. Fafku talked to her, and she agreed that K would be one of the people she would hide.

## IN HIDING

Mr. Goodman was a German civil official delegated by the German government to supervise local authorities. He placed special attention to the sizable local petroleum industry as this was of vital interest to the German military which needed huge amounts of petroleum products. To keep the petroleum industry running at full capacity, many highly trained Jewish workers were needed. Mr. G was authorized by the highest level of the German government to protect these Jewish workers in the industry. This problem was the reason for continuing conflict between Mr. G and the SS. Because of Mr. G's efforts, many Jews stayed in Drohobycz well into 1943 working for the petroleum industry.

Mr. G lived in a nice section of Drohobycz in a large house with a garden in the front and in the backyard. The house was confiscated from a Polish family. It had four rooms and a kitchen on the first floor and one large room on the second floor, meant for domestics. The remaining part of the second floor was a large attic. Above the room on the second floor, there also was a small attic. Covering this attic was a sloped roof that had a high point in the center. It was about five feet high with low points on both sides of the attic that sloped to about two feet high. This attic was the bedroom for the eight people for the next 14 months.

Ms. Maria Labczynska was a middle-aged, Polish woman. She was a deeply religious Protestant, not Catholic as the vast majority of Poles are. Ms. Labczynska was hired to run the house for G, which included all the tasks a stay-at-home wife would have. At home, G was a quiet, well-behaved man who appreciated and respected Ms. Labczynska's work. K's brother met Ms. Labczynska when she was already working for G for a few months. She was sure she could run the house with some people in a way G will ever note. Ms. Labczynska hid a total of eight people in the house, while G was a high-placed German official, without him having any idea. Or perhaps, he didn't want to have any idea. It's hard to think eight additional people were living in Ms. Labczynska's room during the day and then sleeping in the attic above her room at night. It's even more unlikely that they were able to keep total silence 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including weekends when Mr. G was home day and night.

The daily schedule worked out by Ms. L was fairly simple and effective, neither Mr. G nor any of the close neighbors suspected anything. The Germans encouraged local people to report on hidden Jews, and the fact that Ms. Labczynska's hideout existed and survived for about 14 months proves Ms. Labczynska knew what she is doing. During the day when G was at work, everyone stayed in Ms. Labczynska's room. In the afternoon, they climbed to the attic and stayed there all night until next morning when G left again for work.

Life was not easy, but it was bearable knowing this was a way to survive. There was not much physical pain, except very cold nights as the attic was exposed to outside temperature. Mentally, it was a different story. Eight people (three woman and five men) living in such proximity, without any privacy, required a lot of tolerance. Also, because of the secret nature of their existence, verbal relief to ease the tension was not possible. Tension did exist among people; however, K being a youngster was not a part of it. The living conditions were hard. It was similar to being in jail, but they recognized them as lifesaving and accepted them with gratitude.

In the cellar of the house, K found a German-Polish dictionary and some German poetry books between some other books left by the true owners of the house, K had read somewhere about how to learn a foreign language. The method include learning a foreign text by heart without understanding the words, and after mastering the text, learning the meaning of every single word with the help of a dictionary. As he had an abundance of time available, K started to teach himself German using the above-mentioned method. He did not master the German language, but he got to the point of being able to communicate. One of

the people staying with K was a doctor who studied in Vienna, and with him, K practiced his newly acquired German. Years into his adulthood K was able to recite the German poems he acquired in his hide-out.

K's sleeping site was close to the outside wall made of wooden boards. Just ahead of K's site there was a small crack in the board but large enough for K to observe the street. On Sundays when Mr. G was home, the people were forced to stay in the attic all day. It was on these days that K would observe the street for hours through the small crack. He would see people nicely dressed because it was Sunday, walking up and down the street. He would think, “Will I be ever able to walk freely on the street???"

In the summer of this year, 1944, the Red Army offensive reached areas close to Drohobycz. L was thinking the fighting around Drohobycz will take a considerable amount of time and the food supply for the "residents” will be a problem. She decided to secure a two weeks supply. The question was how to buy large amounts of food without arising suspicion. The answer was to buy small amounts in different stores, which Ms. Labczynska could not do by herself. It was clear that the help of at least one local gentile person was needed. It was also clear that the person must be fully trusted and reliable. Once he or she knew about her “guests”, it could mean death for all nine of them. One of the "guests" was a 25-year-old man named M, and he had a suggestion. He thought his nanny, who raised him from infancy to school age and later lived in his home assisting his mother in running the household, could be the person they need. She was considered a part of M’s family and as such could be fully trusted. M got in touch with this woman and explaining the kind of help that was needed. She was excited to see M and agreed to do everything required.

However, she was treacherous, false, mean, and entirely trustless. Less than 24 hours after the woman was contacted, SS thugs were in the house with drawn guns. K was sure they were going to be shot right away. He was so sure that he did not even bother to put on shoes. Surprisingly, he saw himself and the others alive for more than an hour after their arrest. They were led by the SS man to the local prison, and L was taken to the Gestapo headquarters. She was executed the very next day. The arrested people stayed a few days in prison; they were not interrogated or abused. Strangely enough, they were not executed but rather sent to Plaszow, which was a concentration camp (CC), close to the city of Krakow.

The Holocaust was a genocide during World War II in which Germany murdered six million Jews. The main stages of the Holocaust were extermination

camps and concentration camps. The "final solution" was the code word for eradicating the entire Jewish population in Europe. The official decision was made during the Wannsee Conference, a meeting of senior government officials of Nazi Germany with SS leaders, which was held in January 1942 in Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin. The "final solution" of the Jewish question was the physical extermination of all European Jews.

The entire population was to be executed, but those able to work for the important industries for the German war could work before their final disposal. Many Jews and others were killed before January 1942, but sins 1942 the killing was state organized and special extermination camps were built in many locations in Poland. This location was chosen because it was in central Europe and in close proximity to main centers of the European Jewish population. The most horrific were the extermination camps which were designed to mass murder using gas chambers. The people brought to these camps were led directly from the rail cars to the gas chambers. The second category was the forced labor camps, prisoners in these camps usually worked in the arms industry. The living condition and general treatment of prisoners were cruel. Many of them died from hunger and being overworked. And then there were the mixed concentration camps. This included a labor camp where the mass murder of people was performed, but at the same time prisoners lived and worked there.

K arrived in the concentration camp named Plaszow when he was 14 years old and after more than a year was totally removed from anything that could be considered a normal life. He was overwhelmed by the size of the camp. There were thousands of people. In this huge community, horrible, sadistic terror acts were committed daily. K was forced to observe this barbaric reality. Because of his age and born optimistic nature, K realized that if he wanted to live that he had to accept this new reality. Unconsciously, he recognized that this is the real thing which he will have to live with.

He stayed in Plaszow only a few weeks waiting for a work assignment, but the Germans had different plans for K, he was due to be send to Mauthausen. At the beginning of a very hot August, K and a large number of prisoners were led to the railroad station and loaded tightly into cattle rail cars. Prisoners were sitting nested one to another, and there were twice as many men as the car could typically contain. The destination was CC Mauthausen in western Austria, which was about 600 km away. The trip took a few days because trains carrying CC inmates were of least priority, and the train spent many hours on sidetracks.

No food or water was given to the prisoners during the trip and in the suffocating heat men started to die after a day or two. Sitting tightly together, one didn't know if his close neighbor was dead or alive. By the time the train pulled into Mauthausen, many of the men in K's car were dead. When the order was given to disembark, only half of them was able to do so. The surviving arrivals were led to the barrack where the incoming procedures were performed. These included DTT sanitation, showers, distribution of prisoners' clothes, forms, and assignment of a prisoner number. CC Mauthausen had a long history of exterminating prisoners due to the existing conditions, malnutrition, hard 12 hours daily work supervised by Kapos. Those were prisoners appointed by the SS to help run the daily routine in camp. They were as cruel as SS men.

One of the most torturous places were the 186 steps which led from the quarry located on the bottom of the steps to the staging area located on the top of the stairs. The prisoners working in the quarry were ordered to carry heavy rocks (a single rock was up to a hundred pounds) up from the quarry to the staging area. During the years, thousands of prisoners couldn't make the 186 steps with a heavy load on their backs. They fell to their death, and in a domino effect, they took with them many additional prisoners. CC Mauthausen served as the main camp for a large number of sub-camps, each supplying manpower to arms and munition plants located in tunnels dug in the mountains and used as production halls. The living condition and treatment of those prisoners were equal to those in Mauthausen which means as dreadful, as abusive, as against everything that the word "humane" can be attached to. Logical thinking would suggest prisoners working for the war effort would be given a little better treatment, but this was not the case.

K got to CC Mauthausen in August 1944. At that time, thousands of Hungarian Jews arrived. Usually, a few days after arrival, people were assigned to one of the sub-camps and driven there. But this particular time, because many children and sick people arrived from Hungary, the SS made a decision to send sick people and children to Auschwitz for extermination. The local crematorium was not able to perform the required action. In addition to the children and sick arriving from Hungary, the SS decided to include children who had survived in Mauthausen. They would also be taken to Auschwitz. At this time, K was 14 years old, and accordingly to SS definition, he was considered a child. Thus, he was sentenced to death which was to be performed in the extermination camp Auschwitz. Today, in the CC Mauthausen Museum, located on the original campsite documents of prisoners transported to Auschwitz are shown. Years after

the war, K visited this exhibit and got a real chill in his gut when he saw an SS document on the wall listing the names of children sent to Auschwitz on August 19, 1944. One of the first names on the list was K's because his last name started with an 'A.'

K stayed in Mauthausen only nine days. After this, the journey to Auschwitz started. It was a similar journey but in the opposite direction as Auschwitz is very close to Plaszow, the CC camp from which K arrived in Mauthausen.

## AUSCHWITZ

Auschwitz is the best-known CC of the Holocaust. Located in western Poland, Auschwitz was opened in the 1940s. At the beginning, it was mostly for Polish underground fighters. It developed into the most horrific killing establishment where millions of people lost their lives. At the same time, Auschwitz was also a labor camp providing manpower to industries and coal mines located in the vicinity of the camp. The camp prisoners wore a triangle with a number on their uniform. The triangle indicated crimes for which they were incarcerated. Political prisoners wore a red triangle, and they were mostly German communists. Green indicated common crimes including murder. Yellow was reserved for Jews.

The train arriving in Auschwitz from Mauthausen on August 1944 carried over a thousand men, mostly injured or sick, children, and teenagers. They disembarked after three days of travel in closed cargo cars, without water or food, in the oppressing heat generated by the August sun. The prisoners were hardly human and totally disoriented. K, in spite of everything around him, stayed alert and relatively strong. His only obsessive thought was about water. After disembarking, people were standing close to the railcars on the area adjacent to the train. The distance to the next spur was 12 feet. On one side was the train they arrived on, and on the other side was an additional railroad spur with an empty train. Between the two trains, a 12 feet corridor was created, and people were ordered to move along this corridor towards a platform on which a few SS men were standing. Before reaching the platform, people were required to fall into a single file, which led to an SS officer who performed the selection. There were two staging areas in front of the SS officer, one to his left and one to his right. Once a man arrived about ten feet from the officer, facing him, he was ordered to stop for a few seconds.

The officer looked at the man for a few seconds and gestured with his hand to the right or the left, and the man walked to one of the staging areas. K moved with the people, and when he got about 50 feet from the selection officer, he saw that the left staging area had a mass of people. The right staging area had a group of 50 to 60 men. K's obsessive thoughts about drinking water whispered to his mind, "Go to the small group. They will get water much faster than the large group."

K did not wait to get in front of the selection officer. He moved to the small group. Since he was tall, he didn't stick out. To this day, K does not know how he got to the small group without being seen by a guard. Within a relatively short time, the group of men including were taken to the prisoner's incoming barrack. Almost immediately, K found a water faucet and drank until he practically lost his mind. But it was good, very good. He never knew that plain water from a faucet could make a human being so happy. It took him only a short while to recover from this "happy" state of mind and realize that he was in Auschwitz. In the incoming barrack called the "sauna," men undressed, got a haircut (many of K's transports were Hungarian Jews coming straight from Budapest with long hair and in street clothes), a DTT spray (sanitizing agent), and finally showered. After this, prison clothes were issued.

Once dressed, the prisoners were registered, a prison number was issued, and the number was tattooed into the forearm of the prisoner. K was eager to know the whereabouts of the children who arrived with him. He asked about them to one of the attendants. The guy gave him a weird look and took him to the window and pointed to a smoking chimney smoking with black smoke.

"Look up there. You see the black smoke? In there are your friends."

At first, K did not understand what the guy was talking about. K, although far from being stupid, was a kind of naive. In spite of the harrowing days in Mauthausen and the two horrible trips to and from Mauthausen, he still was thinking the children were taken to a camp. The thought that all the children he was with on the train were now dead was unbearable, shocking, and too cruel to be true. Only now, thinking about the unthinkable, K re-lived the arrival and selection process. The selection was like a scene from Dante's Hell, showing the criminal SS officer playing God and making decisions who is to live and who is to die in gas chambers. K now realized how close he was to the Angel of Death.

During the past three war years, K was touched many times by the "Angel of Death" but few of them so explicit, so brutal, so close as the criminal killing of children in Auschwitz.

After completing the incoming process, the prisoners were taken to the men's section of the camp. The section consisted of two rows of barracks with about 10 feet of distance between them. In each barrack, there were a large number of three vertical bunks. The total number of men in a barrack was probably 240. K was given one of the topmost bunks as he could easily climb.

Between the two rows of barracks, there was a large staging area used to assemble prisoners to check attendance, make public statements or perform penalties in public, usually caning. Adjacent to K's men camp, there was a women's camp built similarly to the men's. The camps were divided by a tall barbered wire fence. In the adjacent women's camp was K's cousin Fela. K was shocked when one day during his walks he saw Fela. He was able to call her attention and establish eye contact.

K and the men who arrived with him were waiting to be assigned to a labor sub-camp. While waiting, they were allowed to walk around the barracks. One day, K climbed to his bunk, and to his pleasant surprise, he found three pieces of white bread, which must have been left by the previous occupant of the bunk. Three pieces of white bread by the camp's definition was a little treasure. K decided to throw one of the pieces to Fela. The next morning K went close to the women's camp barbed wire fence and asked one of the passing by the woman if she could find Fela and ask her to come to the fence. Indeed, after a few minutes, Fela appeared and K happy to see her. He said hello and gave her the good news about the bread and threw it to her. To his surprise, her face was terrified. K turned around and in front of him stood a tall SS officer with a huge dog. "What are you doing here?" asked the SS officer in German.

"I threw a piece of bread to my cousin," K answered in German.

K was now thankful he learned German while hiding in Drohobycz. The SS man looked at K for a very short while and said, "Hau ab," or, "Get lost," in German.

K indeed got lost as fast as his feet were capable of carrying him. A long time after this accident K thought about how the SS officer could have released his killer dog, and K would have finished his short life in Auschwitz. K, according to typical prisoner behavior, should have tried to save himself with some lame excuse if caught in such an offense. Why K answered with the truth, which was incriminating evidence by camp standards, K knew was a subconscious decision. The SS man indeed expected some lame excuse from the boy in front of him. K's obvious admission of the truth caught the SS guard unprepared, and after a second of hesitation, he decided to free the boy. The real truth will never be

known. For the SS man, this was an insignificant encounter, but for K, it was a life or death encounter.

After a few days in Auschwitz, K was assigned to a sub-camp in the Village of Wesola, a small place near the city Myslowice. This was a relatively small sub-camp, holding about a thousand prisoners most of them working in a coal mine. Main camps and sub-camps were indeed dreadful, harrowing, and tormenting. Even a rich language is short of giving a real description of this reality.

The Wesola camp was a tiny bit less dreadful. K was assigned to work in the coal mine as Wesola provided manpower to one coal mine only. The mine was hundreds of feet below ground level. An elevator was used to get to work. The work K performed was hard miners work supervised by a local civilian foreman called Shtygar.

Shtygar was a native Silesian, a people of Polish-German roots who could claim to be Polish or German. However, by the last days of the war, most of them identified themselves conveniently as Poles. The reason the foremen treated the prisoners almost like civilian workers was because of the war situation. By now, it was clear Nazi Germany was on the verge of collapse. K was not embarrassed to point out this fact to his foreman who responded with silence. People who lived many years under the Nazi regime were scared even to think—let alone say something against the regime. K took a risk talking to the foreman who could talk to somebody about K's ideas, which would have bad consequences. K worked with this foreman a few months during which he proved to be a decent man, repeatedly bringing food for K and treating him fairly during working hours. But K did not try to guess how the foreman would react to K's predicting the Nazi collapse. He did so because he was happy to share his feelings about the impending Nazi demise. It was not very clever for K to do this, but it was a real pleasure to say, "Nazi Demise."

K worked in the mine for the last several months in 1944 and for a few weeks in 1945. In early January, the Soviet Army approached the camp. The SS camp commandant received orders to evacuate the men. Lacking means of transportation, the SS ordered the prisoners to march to the Gliwice railroad station which was a distance of about 25 miles. Also, the main camp Auschwitz and the sub-camps were ordered to walk to railroad stations west of Auschwitz. If one could fly over Silesia on January 17-19, 1945, he would see numerous marching columns with the background of white snow, a strange and bewildering site. But down on Earth, it was a tragic event with thousands of people losing their life by freezing to death or being shot by the guards. Some men fell from

exhaustion and then were subsequently shot and killed by SS guards. Death Marches became the name of this event given by historians.

## DEATH MARCHES

The prisoners in K's camp, guarded by SS men, started their Death March on January 17, 1945 from Myslowice to Gliwice railroad station. The march lasted three days. When they reached Gliwice, the prisoners who were still alive after the march were loaded into cargo railroad cars on route to Mauthausen. K could not explain how he and some fellow prisoners survived the three days and nights. It was terrible walking in the cold – with little clothing, no food, no sleep – and watching many of their comrades get shot and killed. Under these conditions, survival seems impossible, but a considerable percentage of the people made it. This was a miracle.

The train trip to Mauthausen took four days and nights. It was a grueling journey, and as expected, not all prisoners survived it. After disembarking, the prisoners were led to the camp's receiving barracks where prisoners are processed and given a prisoner's number. For K, it was Mauthausen part two. He was processed in the same way he was five months previously; however, the camp did not recognize K's prisoner number that was given to him after his first arrival. According to the camp's authorities, K who arrived five months ago must be dead as he was sent to Auschwitz for extermination. A new prisoner number was given to K, and he was led to a barrack that was to be sent to a forced labor sub-camp within a few days.

## EBENSEE

K did not stay long in Mauthausen. After only a few days, he was moved to CC Ebensee, one of the worst camps in the entire Nazi network. Ironically, it was located in a charming town in Upper Austria.

The camp was established in 1943, and thousands of prisoners died there while building huge tunnels in the surrounding mountains. The tunnels housed armament plants, which were evacuated from the cities in Germany that were exposed to Allied bombing. When K arrived in Ebensee, this was history. A large number of armament plants were already operating in the tunnels so many died to build, and the Ebensee camp was the main source of labor for these plants. It so happened that the worst Nazi camp turned out to the best for K personally. A

day or two after his arrival K was placed in a barrack and given a bunk. Both were similar to the ones in which K had the dubious privilege to be in before. This barrack for incoming prisoners was also used by authorized people to come and find suitable workers for the plants they represented. Also, those in charge of the camp services picked men they needed. Prisoners ran the in-camp services; usually, they were long-time prisoners. Many of them were German communists. They enjoyed very good living conditions comparable to the conditions of SS guards.

A day after K got to the barrack, a well-dressed man in good physical condition with a low prisoner number and a red triangle entered the barrack. His name was Robert. He was from Luxembourg, and he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for anti-Nazi political activity. His first prison was the Dachau camp. He got to Ebensee at the very beginning of the camp construction. His present job was to run the SS warehouse which supplied the needs of SS soldiers and officers. This was not unusual; longtime prisoners who survived the first years in concentration camps received special privileges and helped the SS run the camps in later years. The conception of the concentration camps came to life in the 1930s after Hitler came to power. They were initially used as prisons – mainly for political prisoners. Some of them became cruel helpers of the SS, but many of them, especially the political prisoners, did a lot of good for other prisoners. Robert came to K's barrack to look for somebody to work for him. He approached K and asked if he spoke German. Receiving a positive answer, he told K that he would work for him and told K to follow him. The job Robert had for K was to stay in the delivery room of the warehouse during the day, which acted as a store. K was now the store's attendant. Robert explained that any SS man is entitled to receive replacements for worn-out items like uniform parts, blankets, etc. K was to check if the worn-out items were indeed worn out, issue a new one, and have the man sign a receipt. The job seemed simple, and the next day K started to work. His first customer was an SS man who entered the store with a torn blanket and asked K to issue a new one. When the SS man entered K's first reflex was to run, but he controlled himself and answered the SS man. It was a strange feeling to talk to somebody who was considered to be your executioner.

It started to be even more so when the German man proved to be nice, almost friendly. Who knows, maybe the SS man was indeed nice or maybe he was worried his blanket was not torn enough to be exchanged. In the store, K

represented authority. He was given the power to refuse an exchange. Regardless of K's being a prisoner, and on top of this "crime" a 15-year-old teenager, he was the authority. According to the German soul, he has to be respected. Pretty soon, the SS men coming to the store to exchange items were bringing some little presents like sausage, cheese, white bread, etc. This was bizarre but understandable; they wanted K's good will.

Robert was satisfied with K's work and would occasionally visit the store and chat with K about the war. Both were happy with Germany being on the verge of collapse and equally happy to be able to talk about it.

For K, the most dreaded CC Ebensee was El Dorado. He was well-dressed. His underwear was all SS quality, and he had "high-class food" according to CC standards. Time spent in the heated store with easy work felt like being in a resort. Yet, K's "heaven" was really only K's heaven. Normal men living in a normal world would definitely not describe K's work as heavenly. The men wouldn't know that K lived on "another planet," an expression borrowed from the prosecutor in Eichmann's trial. But on this bizarre planet, K's living conditions in Ebensee camp were indeed a miracle.

K's El Dorado came to an end because of unrelated history. Arriving in Mauthausen, the prisoners had to answer a camp attendant personal question, which was recorded on a registration card later used to assign prisoners to sub-camps. One of the questions was your profession. It would have been stupid for K to say "student" as that much was clear. K remembered as a small boy that he could change electric fuses, which made his mother very proud. She used to say, "Look at the little electrician."

This memory prompted K to say electrician to the attendant and so that was what was recorded. Apparently, there was a shortage of electricians in one of the plants close to Gusen 1, another sub-camp of Mauthausen. One day Robert came into the store and with sorrow gave K the bad news of an order that came to transfer K "the electrician" to Gusen 1.

## GUSEN 1

Prisoners from other Mauthausen sub-camps required no incoming procedures. K got to Gusen 1 in the afternoon in March of 1945. He was assigned a barrack and a bunk. The next morning he went with a large group of men to one of the industrial plants that manufactured tank gears, which were located walking distance from the camp. K was introduced to P, an electrician foreman serving the

tank gear plant and a Pole from the city of Poznan. P looked at K, and it was clear to him that K was no trained electrician. He was at best a hungry teenager ready to work and learn. P was nice enough not to ask any electrical questions but told him to listen to what he was required to do, and things would work out. P was 40 years old, Polish, Catholic, and a professional electrician.

During his last two years in Gusen 1, he was in charge of the entire electrical system supplying power to tank parts manufacturing plant and as such was respected even by the SS men. P was usually quiet but loved to tell jokes and had a sense of humor. K felt good working for him after he passed the most important test for K. He did not report that K was no trained electrician. That alone could have had deadly consequences for K. In an odd way, while working for P, K learned to be a real electrician, and P was happy to teach him.

In Gusen ,1 there was a large group of Russian soldiers and officer who were an important support group. They worked in many plants, but some of them worked on local farms. K was friendly with them, and they somehow kept a human face in spite of the general camp condition.

One day a Russian who worked on a farm told K that he could bring him a few potatoes from the farm every day. However, he had no way to cook them. K told the story to P who came up with a plan for how to deal with the task of cooking. With the materials available to him, he could make an electric hot plate on which the potatoes could be cooked. This would need to be done in the High Voltage Transformation Room, which was also under P's control. The reason P suggested this room was because the sign on the door read "High Voltage No Entry." P said K would be in the room while cooking, and if he heard somebody approaching, he should call out loudly "HIGH TENSION" as a warning. The plan worked, and they kept cooking potatoes almost until the end of the war. P and K received 2 out of every 10 potatoes cooked. It was a great addition to the starvation diet they got during their time in the camp.

It must be said that if the potato cooking network had been exposed, all parties involved would be executed. It was the Russian who brought the potatoes from the farm, K who took the potatoes from the Russian and brought them to work, and P who was really was the mastermind behind the whole operation. It sounds wild, "for two potatoes they risked their lives." Yet, this was the reality.

The notion that the end of the war was close, and German collapse was felt in the camp. The prisoners talked about it, the camp's Prominent class were subdued and started to treat their fellow prisoners differently. Those were the Kapos, barrack leaders and other prisoners cooperating with SS running the

camps. These prisoners were enjoying good camp conditions and were just as cruel as the SS men. The fellow prisoners hated them. Some of them were German criminals sentenced to longtime prison sentences.

Simultaneously, with the hope of liberation, prisoners started to worry about a plan that the SS men might have to bring the entire camp population to the tunnels and then blow up the entries. The plan existed but was never used. The primary reason for the German's abandoning the plan is not known.

One day, about two months before the war ended, K was called to the main camp office. To his enormous surprise, he was handed a Red Cross food package addressed to Karol Altbach, Gusen 1 by an SS officer. Including K, there were about a hundred other prisoners receiving a package.

At that time, secret negotiation went on between the Germans and the Allies about a possible cease-fire. To make a positive gesture, the Germans allowed a certain number of food parcels to be delivered to CC inmates. Statistically, receiving a package as a CC inmate is similar to winning about a $100 million in the lottery today. K was very excited about the package which included delicatessen food like crackers, canned meat, Swiss cheese, chocolate, and more. But K's excitement was not about the food but about a theory that K had developed around the package and told to many of his inmates.

The theory was simple. Until now, every one of them was just a prisoner numbered 12345. But from now on, K was Karol Altbach, a man with a first and last name kept in the files of the Red Cross in Geneva. Nobody would dare to kill K as they would be charged with murder. Obviously, the theory was naïve, but it was a great boost to K and his friends. Most of K's friends were Russians with whom he established friendly relations from day one of his arrival in Gusen 1.

For many men, the food package was a mixed blessing. Having spent years on the camp's starvation diet, which were very low in proteins. Their stomachs were not equipped to process high protein food in such large amounts. Tragically some of the food package recipients died. The food packages were the last major camp event before liberation.

And then came the 5$^{th}$ of May there was tension in the air, and everybody was aware the end is coming. It was enough for some of the inmates to notice an American jeep with a few American soldiers at a distance. They yelled, "the Americans are coming!" The yelling was a battle cry for thousands of prisoners to start an act of brutal revenge on fellow prisoners, Kapos and Blockelteste. Thesewee mostly German criminals sentenced to long prison terms and picked by

the SS men to run the daily life of the camp. All those years they faithfully executed the most vicious instruction given by the SS men.

The camp was in chaos. Most people looked like skeletons, and some of them are lying outside their barracks, not understanding what was going on. Only later, after the US Army entered the camp, were those prisoners taken care of by the army medical staff. They did a great job saving many of those lives. The masses of prisoners moved towards the now wide-open gates to leave the camp's grounds and embrace the freedom, which many of them did not believe they would ever see.

K was physically, relative to other inmates, in good shape. He was lean but not gaunt. He had control of his movements, and all his senses were sharp. He felt elated and strong. He was ready to go, to leave this damned camp, and to be FREE. He didn't ask himself why he survived, while so many millions perished, but the question was in the air. There were many answers – some of them controversial. Was it the Divine Being watching and protecting? But why him and not others? Babies? Pure human beings having no sin? For the duration of the war, he was exposed to death daily, and he had many encounters with death. He was directly and specifically sent to Auschwitz because by German CC standards, a 14 years old boy was considered a child. He was sent to be killed.

There were a number of objective reasons why K survived the Holocaust while most boys his age did not. He was a healthy boy with above average intelligence, and he was born with an optimistic nature. He was given an instinct to survive. And above all of this, he had an enormous amount of luck.

The question of God, Divine Being, religion, faith was never contemplated by K. His childhood home was traditional Jewish but far away from orthodox Jewry. They observed Jewish holidays, and during High Holidays, K used to go with his father to a small neighborhood synagogue and didn't understand a word of what is going on, including the prayers. The prayers were using Hebrew with a specific Eastern European Jewish accent. Nobody, including K's father, ever tried to explain religion to him. It was assumed that if you grew up in a traditional Jewish family you would turn out to be a traditional, Godfearing Jew.

From the day German troops entered Drohobycz, K, an 11-year-old boy, didn't see, hear or participate in any religious affair. He grew up in a ghetto followed by being homeless. From several concentration camps to a displaced persons camp followed by a socialistic commune and finally serving in an army – all these places were lightyears removed from any tradition or religion. In fact, most of them were places one had to fight for survival. In others, there was no

physical danger but also no family or any other friendly surrounding. K was not removed from a religion, but he was never exposed to one. If he heard sayings about God or prayers to God in CC, they were “Oh, Holy God how can you tolerate all this?”

Religion never caught up with K. He went through life without ever being inside a religious establishment and without belonging to any religious union. At some point, during the years, K lived in areas governed by the Nazis like ghettos and CC. He developed a hate towards Orthodox Jews blaming them for the persecution of Jews. Their sins, as accused by K, were their weird customs. Their birds and sidelocks, their black attire, the entire appearance. This was obviously a stupid thought, but it stayed with K for a long time.

K left the camp with a group of Soviet Army officers who were fellow prisoners and friends of his. They were on their way to Linz, a major city in Austria about 18 kilometers from Gusen. They were looking for revenge, and as they passed the gate, they stopped by the armory. It was open and loaded with guns and ammunition. Each of K's group took a gun with some bullets. On the way, they passed many villages and small towns, which looked deserted. Although, occasionally a woman or an old man would appear. K and his friends’ desire for revenge was not strong and burning enough to kill a woman or a helpless old man. K's thoughts for revenge had been strong while he was in the camp. Many times, he daydreamed of them. Even K's friends, hardened Russian soldiers and long-time prisoners in a brutal concentration camp, could not kill helpless civilians.

Their walk to Linz lasted a few hours and early afternoon they reached the city of Linz. K new stage in K’s life, no more sentenced to death prisoner, no more slave worker, no more hunger, no more living in a Nazi invented Concentration Camp, where the words human being did not exist and the bestiality impossible to describe. All this was past, but what lay in the future, strangely enough K was totally oblivious to the future. He didn’t worry about the future, without being able to describe his feeling that everything will be fine.

K was eleven years old on 22 June, 1941 when he was sentenced to death, he was fifteen years on old on May 5, 1945 when released from the death cell. He was a child in the sentencing day and a teenager when freed.