

Part IV

The Stutthof Concentration Camp (Waldheim)

I.

Our "flotilla", consisting of skiffs, ordinary rowboats and some old small ships, slowly approached the shore. From afar we saw a large sign: Stutthof. Hundreds of armed SS men were arriving to receive their "guests". Suddenly there came an order: "Unload!" Our guards chased us out of the ship, using their truncheons and rifle butts. We ran across the slippery boards of the skiffs, many of us falling into the water. But what did that matter? The sun was strong and it soon dried us off. We lined up in a long and wide column five abreast, with the women in front. The German Jews were very excited, because they were stepping onto the holy soil of their old homeland. Their faces wore expressions of great satisfaction. Free at last of the damned East, home at last in their native land! This homeland received them "well" indeed, and their joy was soon over! We marched along a beautiful asphalt road that led through the small town toward the concentration camp. Everything was deserted. Only now and then we saw an isolated person, who would look at us with pity. A couple of captured English and American soldiers, with hanging heads and tears in their eyes, met us on our way. They knew only too well that only a very few people from that long column would return.

II.

Now we marched past the lovely mansion that housed the administrative offices of *Waldruhe* (Forest Peace). No one could imagine that behind it stood a cruel concentration camp that held tens of thousands of victims. It was fenced in with a double row of electrified barbed wire. High watchtowers stood around the edges, and from afar Stutthof looked like a city in itself. It consisted of a main street and many side streets; there were barracks everywhere. The women's camp was separate. On the left side a new Stutthof was being built. We saw here gigantic stone buildings and large kitchens that had not yet been finished. Apparently an especially large concentration camp had been planned.

Surrounded by SS men, we went through the mighty gate and reached the camp's main street. The women were ordered to march on to their camp. It was completely still in the camp, for everyone was away at work. The few who had stayed in the barracks were the room representatives, and now they came up to meet the new arrivals. We noticed that each one carried a truncheon, which was probably part of the concentration-camp uniform. They talked to us to find out whether we had anything to make cigarettes with, and explained that it would be taken away from us anyway - which in this case wasn't true. Two policemen also came by to satisfy their curiosity. These policemen, German prisoners, were equipped with especially long truncheons, like animal tamers in a circus. They were accompanied by large dogs who seemed ready to eat us up for the smallest infraction. The policemen jeered at us and surely must have thought to themselves, "Now there'll be work for us." And that's how it was.

As it happened, the brief registration procedure was not followed by a thorough body search. This was very lucky, for it gave us an opportunity to smuggle some valuable items into hiding places so that later on we could buy something to eat with these reserves.

We saw we had been badly deceived, and regretted that we had not risked an escape attempt in Riga. We also felt that here a different wind was blowing than in the Kaiserwald concentration camp, where every Latvian Jew still had a connection with the outside world. We were led to the large Barrack No. 3, which was divided into two parts, A and B. We were "allowed" to enter it - but how to settle in was another matter! We slept four to a narrow bed. How was this possible? Well, we didn't sleep at all. And I was especially lucky, because I was assigned a neighbor (Zachodnik) who normally needed a whole bed for himself. Inmates from other barracks came to visit us and informed us of our sad fate. "Here, here," they pointed to the large oven, "is the end of all of us!" Thousands of our brothers had had to go through this oven! They told us of other terrible things, but we were still "naive" and couldn't believe them. But only too soon we were forced to realize that they were telling the truth.

III.

The main contingent of the prisoners in the camp were Poles. But besides them, all the peoples of the earth were represented. One could even meet people from Tunis and Algiers. From afar we saw a large group in uniform. It consisted of Norwegian policemen. We heard that they had been brought here because they had tried to revolt. But their situation was better than ours. The world cared about them. They sometimes received packages from the Red Cross! We seemed to have nobody: no one cared about us, and the world seemed to have forgotten us entirely!

Our Jewish barrack stood across from one for Aryan Poles who couldn't work. Every morning several corpses were carried out of it on stretchers. They went "through the oven" immediately. The room representative of this barrack and his "assistants" had beaten them till they were half-dead. Yes, the only language that ruled the camp was that of the truncheon. Our room representative "Bogus", an Aryan, could not cope with us in spite of his truncheon. So he appointed some of our VIPs with their blue caps to help him. They too were much better off than we were.

In the evening the commandos came back from their work stations. All the roads were swarming with people. We realized that tens of thousands of prisoners lived here. A large column of women marched down the wide road to the women's camp. SS girls accompanied them. During the day they had to work in the ABA (Army Clothing Department) commando. We heard a mixture of all the languages of the world.

Because we had no assigned numbers as yet, we were forbidden to leave the barrack; nonetheless, we walked around a bit to size up the situation. We were chased by policemen and hounded and bitten by the dogs, but this was an everyday event and nobody was particularly impressed by it.

When the surviving members of the first transport to Stutthof and the few Jews from Estonia heard of our arrival, they visited us. We barely recognized them! Those pale faces! Those filthy, ragged outfits from the time of Napoleon, those high, round caps! They were sheer caricatures! We "new ones" still laughed, but they no longer had smiles on their faces. When I saw our old acquaintance from Riga, the elegant Dr. Jakobsohn, dressed like a circus clown in short pants, I too shed tears.

Some of our artists (Schelkan and Arnov) sometimes earned a plate of soup from the room representative with their music. The prominent boxer Kagan, who had sadistically demonstrated his strength in Riga and would do so again in Magdeburg, sometimes earned a bit of food. He had meanwhile become a singer. Our room representative, Bogus, also displayed his cruel instincts. For every small infraction he would order us to troop out to the street. At his familiar command, "All Jews sit down!" we had to squat down, and he and his assistants would then beat us on our heads with their truncheons.

IV.

Now the great evening roll call began in Stutthof. We lined up ten abreast, each group next to its barrack. We were counted and written down in the register until the registrar came to pick up his report. It was quiet throughout the camp. "Caps off!" The registrar arrived. The report on one barrack was correct, the report on another wasn't, so we had to stand at attention for a long, long time on our weak feet. Finally a trumpet sounded from the large watchtower at the entrance gate. It told the world in all directions that the great roll call was over. We felt relieved. The trumpet played the familiar tune of the Marjacki Cloister in Cracow, which was transmitted every noon on the radio. Now began a race to the barracks to grab a place to sleep. Because there was not enough room for everyone, many had to spend the night on the floor. Actually, this was the best place to sleep, because at least there you slept alone. People put their shoes under their heads to help themselves sleep "soundly".

We were awakened at four a.m.! Without enough sleep and totally exhausted, we had to get up in a few seconds. As we left the barrack, each person received his bread ration at the door. Sometimes a loaf of bread had to be shared by five people, sometimes by six. This depended entirely on the room representative, who kept whatever he didn't distribute. He then bought gold and other valuables at the expense of our stomachs. Of course nobody dared to complain, for we feared that if we did so we would "go through the oven". Later, we had to share a bowl of coffee among four people. Everything had to be eaten on the street in the dark. There we also relieved ourselves. The toilet was a story in itself. We had to get permission to get into it at all. Everything was made even more difficult by an overseer (from Vilna). Once, we rejoiced as a certain part of his body was brutally "worked over". There was no provision whatsoever to enable us to wash ourselves, and we were not allowed to enter any other barracks. Shaving was also a great problem. We had to look "young", so we scratched off our beards with any knife that came to hand, which left our faces very cut up. Once we had left our barrack we were not allowed to enter it again. So we were outdoors from very early morning, when it was still dark, till after the evening roll call. Only the VIPs enjoyed the privilege of being allowed to remain in the barracks. The weather was already growing colder, and to "lighten our load" the camp administrators decided to take our coats away from us. We formed "ovens" to warm ourselves: that is, we stood in a tight circle, pressed close together, in order to warm one another.

We still had no numbers, and so we were not yet sent to work. They began to register us under the direction of a Polish Catholic priest who was lodged in our barrack. This took a very long time, and those who were allowed to do this work were fortunate, for while they were doing it they could stay in the barrack. Unfortunately, I had no luck: nobody paid any attention to my efforts, and so I was not chosen to be one of the "registrars". The same priest also organized a group of ten men to pray in the barrack. Suddenly everyone wanted to pray! Not out of piety, but in order to warm themselves up a bit. However, the priest did not select people at random.

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he already knew his "customers". The first ones to be selected were always the son of the prominent Mr. Dubin and Dubin's secretary Mr. Golowciner. They were the "real" prayer reciters. They had great difficulties with the rations because they ate only kosher food, so in this camp they were starving.

During the first few days the Latvian "aristocrats" also visited us. They were the "honor prisoners", and they wore special yellow armbands. There were also other "aristocrats" from other countries. All of them looked well, so apparently they were not doing too badly. Among them was the son of the former Latvian President, Prof. Cakste; the well-known revolutionary Bruno Kalnins; the former Latvian ambassador to Sweden, Seja; the former Minister of Transport, the engineer Einberg; and the former director of Riga's largest chocolate factory, Kuze. They visited their *puikas* (boys) to receive messages of greeting from Riga. We received these people very coolly and did not get involved in any long conversations with them.

V.

Noontime at the camp! There was no set lunchtime for us non-workers: the room representative fetched our lunch whenever he felt like it. Everyone fought for the privilege of carrying the kettle. The reason was that while doing this errand it was possible to see the women and perhaps exchange a few words with them through the barbed-wire fence. The kitchen stood directly next to the women's camp. The food always consisted of thin vegetable soup, but to us hungry people even this tasted good. We stood for hours in long rows to receive it. Afterwards the bowls were collected. This was a new chore - being a "bowl collector" - for which one received an extra portion of soup. But not everyone was lucky enough to get to do it. From all sides came the cry, "*Wolne miski!*" (Empty bowls!) Of course we ate without spoons. Some people drove bargains, trading their soup for a portion of bread or vice versa. In other barracks, lunch was brought in the early morning, poured into large wooden barrels, and covered with blankets.

Many of us became ill because of the wet, cold weather. But there was no infirmary for the Jews. If a person became ill, he went "through the ovens" at once! But our doctors managed to set up several beds in a corner for the sick people in our barrack. As soon as an SS man turned up, all the sick people ran away, for they feared having their numbers written down. Once an SS man really did find some sick people and immediately wrote down the numbers of these unfortunates. That very evening, before the roll call, they were taken away and gassed. Except for the times when we fetched the lunch kettle, the only connection with the women was through the children, who carried notes back and forth. Whether the children were allowed to go to their parents or not depended entirely on the mood of the SS girls at any given moment.

VI.

After several days the last Jews arrived from the HKP barracks camp in Riga. From them I heard that just before they left, my special friend Scheman (from Liepaja), who was also well-known to all the others, had become emotionally deranged. Thereupon he was shot immediately and buried near Kaiserwald. Several young men from the Kaiserwald camp who had tried to escape had also been mercilessly killed. They had even had to dig their own graves beforehand. In contrast to us, the newly arrived group of Riga Jews was searched very

thoroughly. They had everything taken away from them and were forced to wear different clothes. They were also assigned to another barrack. Of the few women in the group, to my knowledge only Mrs. L. Misroch and her daughter survived. All the others died of typhoid fever and starvation. Forty-eight Latvian Jews who were unable to work were also sent to Stutthof from Königsberg in eastern Prussia. They had been told they were being sent here to "recuperate". They looked terrible, being only skin and bones. Some of them were sent to their eternal "recuperation" the very day they arrived. The next day it was the others' turn, as the gas chambers could only handle a certain number of people per day.

Two "Aryans" arrived separately from Riga: the well-known Professor Idelsohn and the industrialist Milmann. The former was known to be a committed Jew, but the latter was a self-professed Latvian. But the fact that Milmann had been baptized more than fifty years ago had obviously been of no avail. Professor Idelsohn had been the only Jew who was not sent to the ghetto. This had been managed by the children of his second wife (a German), who were high-ranking party members in Berlin. But in the end even they could not help him any longer. How often we had seen Professor Idelsohn in Riga running after the Jewish work crews to give them a package of bread! He had repeatedly asked to be put into the ghetto too. Now at last he was sharing the fate of all the Jews, for he had been sent to Stutthof. Three days after his arrival he died of a heart attack and was cremated immediately.

During our time there, even Latvian criminals were brought to Stutthof. It was the Poles who received them "properly" in the barrack assigned to them. The Poles justified this by claiming that the Latvians had helped to put down the Polish revolt in Warsaw, and had also run riot in the Warsaw ghetto with the utmost cruelty.

VII.

In the meantime, I was "naturalized" as a Stutthof resident. I received a new name: Prisoner No. 96046. My number was written on my chest and my trousers. Now we waited for our "invitation" to go to work. We found out from the Labor Authority that our transport was one of the "valuable" ones, as it included a number of specialists. For this reason we would be sent very soon to work outside the camp. There was no food for those who didn't work, so for the time being we were sent every morning to a variety of work stations. There was no system for assigning work, so everything was a matter of luck. Today one might have easy work, tomorrow heavy labor and vice versa.

Many prisoners competed for the job of unloading things from the skiffs. Sometimes during this work it was possible to filch things that could be traded for bread. One day, as I was working on a skiff with my friend Israelith (from Liepaja), I "organized" two left-hand gloves, but this turned out badly, for I was discovered and badly beaten.

Another time, I was assigned to the lumberyard work crew. We had to carry large beams on our shoulders and stack them up in the lumberyard. All this was done under the supervision of Polish foremen, who beat us with large wooden clubs. They explained to us that we were lucky, because before we came there had been a rule that each foreman had to bring back a few corpses from the work crew. These corpses were carried by the first row of the work column. The work was almost impossible for us to bear physically, but we used the last remnants of our strength so as not to have our numbers written down and then be gassed the same evening.

Two huts stood in the woods near our lumberyard. These were the brothels for the SS men. Women of all nationalities, but no Jewish women, were brought to these huts. These women did not look bad, so in terms of food and clothing they must not have had a bad time of it.

Then there was also the notorious work crew No. 105. It was especially feared, and when the foremen of this work crew came to fetch us for work, everyone tried to avoid being selected. But once I was fetched for this work crew nonetheless. We were driven through the large camp gate under heavy guard, and after a long march through the forest we reached our new work station already exhausted. Here we were searched, and everything we owned was taken away from us. Now the *katorga* (unbearably hard labor) began! Once again we had to carry heavy logs on our shoulders, but this time it was from one hill to another. We were not allowed to drag them down from the hills, which would have been much easier. Although we threw all our strength into it, at last we could do it no longer. Thereupon we were beaten murderously with large truncheons, but even that made no difference: we simply couldn't work any more. Now the sadistic foreman made the whole work crew line up and asked each one what his profession was. He made our comrades Schalit and Calel Garber, who said they were musicians, go off to the side, and then he began to drill them. They were ordered to run, he beat them, they were ordered to throw themselves to the ground, creep along on their bellies, run again, and so on. I could hardly bring myself to look at this, and prayed for death to release them! - Fortunately, just then a truck arrived. We had to carry logs to this truck and load them onto it. Then it was noon, and we returned to the concentration camp.

As we marched through the forest the German foreman talked to us. "What kind of people are you?" he asked us. "You must have no God at all, for if you had one, he surely couldn't look on and see how you're being treated." I thought to myself: "This murderer and sadist is right, for doesn't the world know what's happening to us at all? Aren't there any Jews left who know us and want to help us?" But now, as I write these lines, I have changed my opinion totally. I have just read the report on the trial in Poland of the murderers of Stutthof. All of them were condemned to die on the gallows. These cold-blooded slavedrivers, who had killed thousands and thousands of human beings, went to their deaths like the cowards they were. Some Poles who had cruelly mistreated their brothers were also hanged along with the SS men and SS girls.

I would also like to mention something I found out recently: during the war the Swedish section of the World Jewish Congress (which is based in New York) took measures to save the Jews. The Latvian Jew Hillel Storch was involved in these efforts. The son of a respected family from Dvinsk, he had escaped to Sweden with his wife (née Westermann) shortly before the war.

When the horrible news about the fate of his co-religionists reached him, he made contact with Himmler as early as 1943 and later on in 1945, thanks to the mediation of the head of German counterespionage, Schellenberg, and of Dr. Kersten (Himmler's personal physician). He succeeded in more or less postponing part of the extermination, and many of us perhaps owe our lives to him.

VIII.

One day the announcement came: "Jews are not to go to work. At eight o'clock all Jews are to line up in closed ranks on the camp's main street!" The inmates of all the Jewish barracks marched in rows to the street, as they had been ordered to do. They were made to line up according to countries, the Latvians separately, the Germans separately, and so on. A large, high table was brought, and the representatives of the Labor Authority appeared carrying long truncheons. Along with them came some very well-dressed civilians, accompanied by SS men. The civilians were representatives of a factory that needed workers. The slave trade began. We were told that various Jewish skilled craftsmen, but no Germans, would be needed for work in a factory. After hearing this announcement the German Jews hung their heads in dejection, not knowing what to do. But the rest of us thought to ourselves: "So much for your homeland and your 'warm welcome'!"

But our VIPs with their blue caps from the Kaiserwald concentration camp, who were always trying to enrich themselves at the expense of our stomachs, now as ever made sure that some of the Germans were included. For example, the German Jew Oskar Salomon - whose sadistic nature we got to know all too well later on in Magdeburg - managed to smuggle himself into our transport. Now the call rang out: "Skilled craftsmen! Mechanics, shoemakers, tailors and others!" Those who volunteered had to run to the table as fast as they could. It was immediately obvious who could run fast and who couldn't. Those who couldn't were told to go off to the side. Now each of us tried, with his last ounce of strength, to pass this test. Even cripples tried it, but they were sent back immediately.

This selection process for the work crew lasted three days. It was a rest period for us, because (1) we didn't have to work, and (2) we were safe from beatings. In the meantime we found out that the selected workers would be taken to Magdeburg. I had tried by every possible means to be one of them. My efforts were successful. I thought to myself: winter's coming on, and they'll certainly put us to work in closed rooms inside that factory. My supposition was correct.

IX.

The lists of workers were drawn up quickly. Now we had to wait for the trucks into which we would be loaded. Three hundred women, mostly from Vilna and Hungary, and a single small Latvian boy, Sima, were also in our transport. Because the planned departure could take place any day and any hour, we were not sent to do any work for the time being. After several weeks had passed in this way, the Labor Authority decided that our idleness had lasted too long and that we would be sent to work again. In the meantime two other Jewish transports, of women and men, departed. One was headed by a certain Glücksmann and the other by the notorious Kassel. These people worked near Danzig under extremely difficult conditions (see the chapter "Via Stutthof - Burggraben... - Lauenburg to Freedom"). Only a few of them survived, and many died of starvation, the cold, and the beatings.

After the first transport had gone, there was somewhat more space in our barrack. Now once again we went to work regularly. A work crew that drove to Elbing every day had fairly good conditions there. The ABA also set up work stations and employed many of our people, for example the engineer Antikol, Springefeld and others. Unfortunately, none of them survived.

There was a new work crew, the so-called "potato commando". Cars loaded with potatoes would arrive on our narrow-gauge railroad. They had to be unloaded and clamped. The work in itself would not have been difficult, if only the many Polish overseers had not beaten us constantly with large truncheons. They chased us and beat us, shouting, "*Ale juz, ale jeszcze!*" (Do it, do it again!) This "*Ale juz, ale jeszcze*" rang in our ears for a long time. The only good thing about this work crew was that now and then we were able to filch a raw potato, a beet or a carrot. We had to eat them at once on the spot; it was dangerous to take them anywhere, for we were searched thoroughly as we left our work station. If even the smallest thing was found on us, we were punished immediately. For me this work crew was not bad; it even provided me with a *maline* (hiding place). This was the *maline*: I was ordered to take potatoes to the pigsty, and I could use this opportunity to take for myself some of the potatoes that had been cooked for the animals. To enable my comrades to share this "good fortune", I took a different one with me every day.

X.

In the meantime, the news arrived that Riga had already been occupied by the Russians. Of course we rejoiced greatly, but at the same time we were angry all over again that we had not attempted to escape while we were still in Riga. But now it was too late to change things.

One evening all the inmates of the concentration camp were ordered to line up on the camp's main road. Not only the main road but also the side streets swarmed with people. We could see a gallows in the distance. Two Russians who had resisted an SS man were to be hanged. This "just" verdict was read out in three languages (German, Polish and Russian). The German camp representative put the ropes around their necks with his own hands, and a moment later the two young men were dead. We were forced to witness another execution as well.

After that I was put into a construction work crew. A new factory was being built behind the camp. I was ordered to carry lime. The foreman noticed that this work was much too hard for my physical strength and wrote down my number. At once I sensed danger and asked him for another job. Thereupon he ordered my comrade Hahn and me to carry bricks to the second floor. Hahn told me he was ill, so I was the only "strong" one. We labored and struggled, using all our strength. Fortunately it grew dark soon, and the work crew had to return to the camp. Our joy was boundless. In this way, people struggled to survive every day, for in spite of all the cruelties we wanted to live.

Shortly before our departure for Magdeburg, more than a thousand Jews came to Stutthof from the notorious concentration camp Auschwitz. They included people of all nationalities, but most of them were Greeks and Hungarians. I also met some people from our region (Bialystok). They told us about horrible things. Until then I had believed that there was nothing more horrible than Stutthof, but after hearing their reports I knew better. In Stutthof hundreds of human beings went "through the ovens" every day, but there it was thousands. At the special railroad station of Auschwitz the transports were received with music, and to music the rows of women, men and children were taken to the gas chambers. I heard very gruesome stories. Unlike the inmates of other concentration camps, the inmates of Auschwitz had their numbers tattooed on their wrists. I found out that they numbered in the hundreds of thousands. - The new arrivals were not put to work until they had been "naturalized". So they wandered around every day in the street next to their barracks in the cold and damp.