



By chance alone

Max Eisen

From České Budějovice to Moldava

The truck took approximately eight hours to drive to České Budějovice, Czechoslovakia. It was a Sunday afternoon, and we disembarked in the centre of the town. People sat at sidewalk cafes eating and drinking while a band played music nearby. When they saw us in our Hitler Youth shirts, a silence fell over them. From the way they looked, however, they soon realized that we were returnees from the camps. Several approached us and invited us to join them at their tables, and we were overjoyed to accept. They ordered food and drinks, which rapidly disappeared into our bellies. My digestive system was no table to cope, however, and soon I suffered stomach pain. My habit in the camp was to eat food whenever it was available because there was always the fear that tomorrow there would be none. But now this habit was wreaking havoc with my stomach. Since I was the only one in our group of eight who spoke Slovak, the townspeople directed their questions to me. I explained that I was trying to get to my hometown near Košice (which had been called Kassa under Hungarian rule). They told me that the railway system was not fully operational because the retreating German army had blown up many bridges, and there were no scheduled times for departures and arrivals. I asked if they knew of a place where we could rest and spent the night. One man said that he'd heard something about a building offering accommodation to refugees, but he didn't know where it was. Another man invited a policeman to our table, and he offered to take us to a shelter. It felt so good to be able to trust a Czechoslovakian policeman after my experience with the anti-Semitic Hungarian gendarmes.

The two-storey shelter had several rooms set aside to house returning refugees. There were straw filled mattresses and blankets on the floor, and a table and chairs across the room. On one wall, there was a large piece of paper where the returnees were able to record their names, the date they came to shelter, the camp from which they had come, and the place where they were headed. I read through all the names, but I did not see anyone I knew. I added my name to the bottom of the list and provided my details, hoping that someone might discover I was still alive. After this day's excitement and my full, bloated belly, I was ready for rest. I lied down on the fresh straw mattress and fell fast asleep.

The next morning, our group discussed how to proceed with our travel plans. We had no breakfast to start the day and no funds to pay for anything, and

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my body was not functioning well. My feet were extremely swollen, but I was determined to put one in front of the other and keep going until I got to Moldava. The distance was unfathomable; Moldava was hundreds of kilometres away, near the Hungarian border.

A Good Samaritan arrived at the shelter mid-morning with a bag of bread and buns, which we shared among us. I asked her how to get to the railway station and told her that we wanted to get to Budapest. From there, I would travel on to Košice. She advised me to take any train going to the east – preferably one going to Brno and from there to Bratislava. From Bratislava, I would be able to find a way to get to Moldava.

The eight of us proceeded to the railway station and, after a long wait, boarded a train to Brno. We did not have to pay a fare, which was just as well because we had no Money. But the trip turned out to be an enormous undertaking. Whenever the train could no longer proceed because of damaged bridges, we had to disembark and walk long distances to the next station. There, we would wait for another train and jostle with other to get seat. In my weakened state, this journey was an ordeal, but we managed to find food and refugee shelters along the way, and we arrived in Bratislava after a week. There, we were directed to a shelter organized by the local Jewish community. They had facilities for washing our clothes and ourselves, and we could stay an extra day from the camps, I spotted the name of Chaim (Tibor) Lazarovits, my first cousin on my father's side of family. He was about two years younger than I, and he had signed in month earlier. It felt good to know that at least one member of my family was alive, but I had no idea how to find him. I noticed that I was becoming increasingly bloated and heavy-looking, and it was certainly not due to the frugal portions of food that I had consumed. I couldn't button up my shirt, the legs of the corduroy breeches were too tight, and my feet were so swollen that I could no longer fit them into my boots. I knew I had to do something before leaving for the next stage of the journey. I managed to borrow some scissors and a knife to cut off the upper part of the boots and make them into slippers, and then I tied a string around the heel so they would stay in place as I walked. I cut the legs off the breeches and the sleeves off the shirt, but still couldn't button it up. I knew that if I didn't soon stop and rest my body, I would not be able to endure much more. My spirit was willing to push on, but my body was not cooperating.

When we arrived in Budapest, I parted company with the other seven guys from my group. The railway station was large facility with many tracks and a lot of people milling around. I was alone again and could not figure out where to go. When I asked an attendant for assistance, he directed me to

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a Russian troop train headed to Slovakia and then on the Soviet Union. This was my only option because there was no civilian train traffic to of raucous soldiers who were drinking and carousing. They asked me who I was and what I was doing on their train. I explained that I was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, and that I was trying to reach my home near Košice. I worried that if the train did not stop there, I might wind up in the Soviet Union. I knew I wasn't in any shape to endure another adventure.

The Russian soldiers made a space for me on the beach and passed around a bottle of vodka with jar of pickles. They told me to take a bite of pickle and wash it down with a swig of vodka, and that way I would never get drunk. I knew they would be insulted if i didn't drink with them, so I participated, even though it clearly wouldn't be good for my health. After taking a small bite of the pickle and a little vodka, I passed both along to the next person. The party continued for a long time. The soldiers were happy to be returning home after driving the Nazis all the way back to Berlin. It was dark outside, and eventually the drinking and talking petered off. Soon I could hear the sound of the soldiers snoring and railway cars clicking in the tracks.

My chest ached with pain and I could only sit upright. I couldn't sleep, so I took sock of the events of the past years. I knew I would soon confront the reality of my losses, and the thought of that frightened me almost as much as anything else I had faced. I sat squeezed between the soldiers like a block of wood in a vise, and I dared not make a movement to disturb them. I finally dozed off from mental and physical exhaustion, and when I awoke, the morning sun was breaking and I knew that soon we would arrive in Košice.

The soldiers woke up, stretched, and joined the long line to the railcar's toilet. I realized that I would have to wait until I got houses, orchards, and buggies on the road, and as the train finally slowed down, I saw the sign for Košice. I said goodbye to the soldiers and thanked them for their hospitality, and then I got off the train and went into the station. I looked at the large clock. It was 10 a.m., the middle of July 1945.

I remembered that immediately outside the station there was a pedestrian bridge that passed over the Hornád River and led into a beautiful park with mature trees, flowerbeds, and benches. I couldn't wait to take shelter under on of those trees and simply take in the beauty of nature, with its luscious smells and sights and sounds. It was balm for my soul and I welcomed the seclusion from public view. I realized that my appearance did not suit a civilized world, but I also wanted to be alone so that I could figure out how to get to my home, which was still fifty kilometres away. I also wondered if I should go into the centre of Košice to look for the cousins I had lodged with when I was apprenticing here.

Project number: 2020-1-SK01-KA229-078288_1



I decided to walk to the Friedmans' restaurant to see if it was open. I fit wasn't, I would go to the open-air market where farmers brought their livestock and produce to sell. Košice was a beautiful city with a large Jewish community, but I wondered how many of them survived. With my decrepit appearance I felt exposed and vulnerable as I walked around. The restaurant was closed up, and I was upset to find strangers occupying the Fren dmans' apartment. At the market, people looked askance at me and gave me a wide berth. The farmers had all kinds of food for sale, but I had no money to buy anything. I told myself that I had experienced worse things in the past year and looks could not hurt me. I searched for anyone I knew, hoping to see someone from Moldava. Finally, I spotted a farmer who lived a few kilometres from my home, and I asked if he would give me a ride in his buggy. At first, he wasn't very responsive. But I remembered that he used to buy lumber from my grandfather on credit, and I thought that he might still owe money. I asked him to consider the ride a favour to my grandfather. He relented, but this award exchange gave me a taste of what I could expect when I reached home.

When the farmer had sold his last item, he told me to climb up into his empty wagon and we started down the road to my town. As we mounted a hill, I could see the brickyard where my family and I had been interned before being shipped to Auschwitz just over a year before. I could see the sheds full of dried bricks, the large chimney of the power plant, and the railway tracks that carried us away. Faced with this reminder, I felt apprehensive about returning to my former home. Then I recalled the journey I'd made with my mother, my two brothers, and my aunt in 1942, and I remembered how excited I had been to walk home from the station. The first to greet me then was my dog Farkas, and I began to fantasize about a similar homecoming as the farmer's wagon moved along the road at a leisurely pace. In fact, during my incarceration in Auschwitz and the other camps, the hope of being reunited with my beloved and loyal friend Farkas kept me going. Finally we crested a hill, and I could see my home in the near distance. The farmer had to turn off the road to get to his own house, so I climbed down off the wagon and continued on foot. During the entire journey to the town, we did not Exchange a single word. When he ate some food, he didn't offer me any, and he never asked what had happened to my grandfather and the rest of my family.

I crossed the railway tracks a short distance from my home, and I could clearly see the yard in the distance. Had Farkas still been there, he would have flown through the gates to greet me. But he did not come. I stood there consumed by numbness and total silence, remembering how this was once a busy place filled with some sounds of people going about their daily tasks,

Project number: 2020-1-SK01-KA229-078288_1



chickens and ducks roaming in the yard, and Farkas and our two fox terriers providing security.

The house was still there, but there was not a living being anywhere near it. It seemed like a place with no soul. I saw my family in my mind's eye and thought of each person I had lost. It was a shattering feeling of finality, and I asked myself how I could pick myself up and go on. But then I remembered my father imploring me to tell me the world had happened at Auschwitz, and it inspired me to continue. I went up the stairs to the porch and opened the door to my mother's kitchen I saw the familiar credenza where she'd stored her dishes. And beside it, I saw a neighbour sitting at my mother's table. This woman didn't recognize told her who I was, she became angry. When I asked for water, she refused and told me to go away.

In my physically and emotionally weakened condition, I was unable to stand up to her. I had no support system, no one to help me prove my rightful claim to my family home. I left the house and walked to the town centre, hoping to find a familiar Ily, who had lived across the street and was a good friend to my mother, did not appear to be living there anymore. I wanted badly to connect with her because I knew I could depend on her.

I was fearful as I walked toward the centre of the town. I recalled what people had shouted at us thrown at us as we walked from the school to the railway station during our deportation. But the people I passed on the street ignored me, and familiar Jewish homes were now occupied with unfamiliar faces. These new occupants seemed quite content working in theirs. Since no one stopped to offer me help, I felt there was on empathy for my sickly appearance, which increased my anxiety.

As I continued into town, I passed the building where the Bonder family had once operated a bicycle store and repair shop. There, I found one of the Bonder brothers in the living quarters behind the store. I learned that he had been a partisan, and he'd returned to the town in February 1945. When I asked him who else had come back, he said that Gabriel and Bandy Litchman, the brothers I'd seen in Ebensee, had returned and were living in a home in town. He also told me that Ily's husband was now the mayor and they lived in a prominent house nearby.

I went immediately to Ily's home, remembering the beautiful music that she had once played. I felt ashamed to present myself in such sorry shape, and she was shocked when she saw me. But she gave me a big hug and said my name in an endearing way that signalled closeness. It felt so wonderful to be received in this way. She looked me over from top to bottom and began to heat water for a bath. I was mortified to take off my rags and

Project number: 2020-1-SK01-KA229-078288_1



let Ily see how filthy I was. She checked my head and found lice in my short hair. She noticed my bloated body and asked me if I was ill. I told her that I had pains in my chest and could not breathe well, and that I could only sleep in a sitting position. While the water was heating for the bath, she used chemical to wash my hair and killed the lice. Once I was in the tub, she poured water over my body to clean me and said that while I dried myself, she would get me some clothes to wear. She brought me underwear and socks, neither of which I had worn for the past fifteen months. For the first time in over a year, I felt like a human being again.

After my bath, I was ready to collapse. Ily made up a bed with lots of pillows so that I could sleep in a sitting position, and she told me that she would take me to the doctor in the morning. I had a restless night with horrible dreams, and I couldn't figure out where I was when I awoke. I could hear birds in the bushes outside and smell the aroma of coffee being brewed. Surrounded by all these comforts, I was consumed by disbelief. I had breakfast with Ily and her son, Nori, on the porch, where I was able to observe their beautiful gardens. When she asked how I felt, I told her that I was still having very bad chest pain. She said she would take me to the doctor in a few hours in the meantime, I went to find the Litchman brothers.

I had last seen Gaby and Bandy in Ebensee, but they had been in much better physical condition than I was and able to head home right after liberation. I was happy to see them again, but still felt envious that they had each other and I was by myself. They were now in relatively good health, and we immediately began discussing how we could start up our lives again. It was clear that there was no future for us in this town. I asked them to go with me to my house because I wanted to find out about my dogs, especially Farkas. They agreed to accompany me, and with their support, I again faced the woman who now lived in my home. I asked her if she knew what happened to our three dogs, but she told me she knew nothing.

The three of us took a walk into the orchard, which was in total disarray. The trees had not been pruned, and many of them had been damaged by large vehicles that were apparently sheltered beneath them. The whole orchard appeared to have been destroyed by retreating Nazi armoured units, and we had to be careful not to step on bullets and mortar shells scattered across the fields. It was devastating to think of how much care my grandfather and I had once taken to nurture bountiful fruit from the trees.

Suddenly, I noticed some movement in an area of thick lilac bushes, and I walked over to see what was there. It was our fox terrier, Ali, hiding in the bushes. All his fur was gone and he was full of scabs, and when I called his name, he would not come. I couldn't bear to leave him suffering in this

Project number: 2020-1-SK01-KA229-078288_1



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terrible condition, and I discussed with the Lichtmans what to do. Bandy told me he knew a hunter in town, and we went to him and asked if he could end Ali's suffering with his gun. He agreed. I returned with him to the spot where Ali was hiding, and with a single shot, the hunter put him out of his misery. As I looked at Ali's lifeless body, I knew he was the final remnant of a place that was no longer mine. I had nothing else to do here, no tangible ties to this place-only memories. I had no money to pay the hunter for his service, but I asked him nonetheless if he would help me dig a grave. He understood my situation and agreed. Together, we buried Ali as a final tribute to my past life.

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