Rudy Herz, Part 4

Interviewer: That’s fine.

Herz: One day, then came the bulletin board news, or I believe they had -- oh, the way the system worked, the block Kapo -- you must probably by now -- by now, you will know what the block Kapo was -- assembled us, and as we were outside, he said, “A transport is assembled to go to Mauthausen” -- nobody knew Mauthausen -- “to go to Mauthausen to work in a factory down there.” So he read the names, and then also the names were posted on the board. And we were again marched to the railroad car. This time, the SS did not have -- the German rail stock was pretty much decimated. It was gone, and I have often wondered why or how the SS was able to commandeer, in this dire need to move German population from the warzones back, how they were able to find rolling stock to transport concentration camp inmates. Nevertheless, they did. It was the old cattle car again, and it was a decimated bunch and dispirited bunch of prisoners, but this time, the guards were sitting in the railroad cars with us with kerosene lamps. The guard that we had had even brought his canary bird; again, an incongruity that I have not forgotten, and I will not forget it to the end of my life. Food? We had been given a half a loaf of bread this time. Destination? I knew this time approximately where I was going because I saw -- the railroad station in the larger towns were familiar. And I knew that we were going in a southerly direction because, number one, I know that the Russians were coming, and I know that the Americans were coming from that side. So the only other way we could go was to the south of Germany. I did not know that Mauthausen was in Austria, but I was guessing Dachau, another one, a camp.

At -- so I must stop saying “at any rate.” We were marched to the railroad station. We were loaded into the cattle car. The SS took up his guard position, his Schmeisser gun. He was the only one that had a seat. We had no seats. We were sitting on the floor of the railroad car. And we heard the sirens going on. It was for an air raid, air raid warnings for the Germans to go. We had no place to go. We were sitting on the railroad tracks. The rolling stock was generally halted because the Americans or whoever was bombing would generally take rolling stock and shoot it up because they would shoot the locomotives. So whenever there was a danger of an air attack, they would try and make it to the next railroad yard where there were all kinds of railroad cars, figuring they would have to shoot them all up.

So we went through Germany, and I remember the first dead -- I had seen dead people before. I had people die with me -- not with me. I had had people die in front of me. I had seen about as much dead and had seen as many corpses as I needed for a lifetime. But there, the first corpse at the first place -- we needed, actually, the room to stand and to sit. We were totally -- how shall I say -- we had pain sitting because we had no longer any gluteus maximus. I don’t know what to call -- any, any behind. We had nothing to sit on. We had bones. We were sitting on our bones, on our coccyx, and it is an extremely painful affair. So the first one that died -- the German railroad cars had a brake house at the top of the railroad car, so the first one, the dead person, was taken up there, and the second one also. We were no longer -- this trip took about five days, and we were allowed to go and eat snow when we were thirsty. Bread? There wasn’t any.

From then on, it got worse. People started to die in this railroad car, and we finally stacked the people -- the corpses up. I know it’s disrespectful. I can’t help it. We stacked the corpses up, and we sat on them. The worst part to sit on was the face, but we were even then crowded. So sometimes we sat on a face. Most of us would try to sit on the rump portion of the deceased. I don’t know who died. They didn’t have anything worth stealing. They had no bread because we all had no bread. So we made it to Mauthausen. I believe out of our car of about 70, 80 people, about 20 people, 30 people got out of the car. The rest, we left in. We don’t know what happened to them. Perhaps the details from the main camp came and picked them up later. We did not know.

We were let out of the car at Mauthausen. I don’t know how I knew it was Mauthausen. I think I had seen the -- and we were marched towards Mauthausen, and Mauthausen was a fortress-like concentration camp overlooking the Danube River. And everybody already was speculating that our end would come. How we knew this? We may have divined it. We may have guessed that our end would be, Please, do not let us -- do not load us onto ships because we knew that the Germans were quite capable of forcing us onto a boat, running us into the middle of the Danube River, and sinking the boat or sinking the ship, whatever it was. No, this was not to be our fate. We were marched up to the top of the hill, and it was excruciating. There was water running down. We had not had water now for about a day and a half. We were wild with thirst, and there was water running down by the side of the road, a channel or a runnel, whatever you would like to call it, and we all dipped our cup in this dirty rainwater. It was not sewer, but it was just runoff, and we drank it, and we thought it was great. I don’t know why we didn’t get typhus or anything like that, but anyhow, the SS didn’t even want us to do that. They clubbed us back from there, but I managed to gather a half a cup, and I drank it.

So we marched up there, and we were assembled. We were told to take off our clothing in this bitter cold. I don’t know whether we were feeling any -- yeah, we were feeling bitter cold. We were allowed to keep our shoes on. And something was done to us that I thought, Well, this is the end. The really mean to kill us, and I prepared nearly to die in a gas chamber. By that time, we knew gas chambers. Someone came along, and with a blue ditto pencil -- I’m not sure whether you’re familiar with a ditto pencil. It makes a purple mark on you. They stenciled us -- I think I had a number 7. And none of us knew whether 7 mean death and 3 meant life or 8 meant something else. We didn’t know, but we were sent into the shower. All of our clothing was taken away. We were -- there was no clothing to dry us, so we were run out of the showers, which mercifully had warm water. We were run out of the showers, naked, into the yards, into the room between, into the place between the barracks, and we stood there. And then it occurred to us that what it was, we were assigned to barracks number 7, those with the 7 on their bodies. We were given some sort of ill-fitting clothing. I remember I had only a coat, a winter coat, totally naked underneath, shivering in this cold on the cobblestones until finally some of the German Kapos had pity on me and threw me a pair of underpants and an undershirt. And that was the total amount of clothing I had.

And there, again, in the barracks occurred something that I had not realized, and I’m not sure whether you can realize that. As Jews, we were even below the lowest rank of anyone. We were the outcasts of already an outcast group of people because when the Kapo came around, he said, *“Sind da Deutschen unter euch?”* Are there Germans amongst us? A friend of mine and some other Germans says, *“Ja, wir sind Deutsch.”* “We are Germans.” And he looked at us, and he said, one -- he spit out a word, “Jews! I didn’t mean you.” So he had thought that for once, because we belonged to the great German nation, that these German Kapos at the end of the war would finally realize that we were of the group of people that had shared their culture, their aspiration, their suffering in the Versailles peace treaty. Forget it. We were treated as scum. I mean, everybody was treated as scum, but we were as treated the scum of the scum. So again, we -- I cannot even say the word -- vegetated. We starved in those barracks, and this one day they came and said, “Are there amongst you any of the following?” And he started to enumerate the craftspeople: mechanics, welders, whatever it was, carpenters, anything like that. Well, I volunteered. I said, “I am a welder.” “Okay, get ready. You are going to Gusen to an airplane factory.” Well, anything was better than -- although I did not know that. It could have been death, for all I know. I could have been shot on the road to Gusen.

We were next to a women’s camp in Mauthausen. It was separated from us by a tall wall, but we were able to talk, and we tried to talk to them and find out where they had been, where they came from, how they were treated. They were treated as -- they were as ill-treated as we were. They were starving. “Do you have a piece of bread? I am such-and-such. I am Malka [phonetic] from Lorsch. Is there anyone from Lorsch in there?” “Yes, I’m from Lorsch.” He says, “Would you have a piece of bread?” begging. This went on continuously, and nobody in a well-fed nation like this can possibly understand. When we fast nowadays for Yom Kippur, we almost die. We fasted for four years or three years, and to me, it is inconceivable how any American, in the land of the hot dog and “Mc-hamburger,” could possibly feel what hunger pangs are except coming from school and not getting fast enough to the refrigerator. I laugh at it now. It was bitter. So we heard these anguished voices from the other side, women’s voices. “I’m from” -- well, wherever -- “Bialystok. Is anyone there from Bialystok?” “Yes.” “Did you know my father?” Or did you know such-and-such? And in the end, always the same thing. *“Hobn ir [indistinct] a shtik [indistinct] broyt?”* This happens to be Yiddish, and I’m not sure whether you understand it. “Have you perhaps a small piece of bread?” We would say, “Have you got a crust of bread?” I can’t shake -- I can’t shake this.

At any rate, we made it to Gusen in a, in a, in a covered -- again, in a truck, and we came there, and we were assigned work. By this time, we were so emaciated that three of us were assigned a bunk of about this size. I’m not sure whether the camera can pick it up. What is it? About 3 feet wide. We laid by accommodation, not because we wanted to lay next to each other. We laid one with the head to the -- two people with their heads at the foot end and one person in the middle. We did not stir. We could not stir because it was that close. We transmitted freely a disease called *Skabies.* Would you know what the English word is? It is scabies.

Interviewer: Scabies.

Herz: Scabies. What is the --

Interviewer: Scabies?

Herz: Yeah, but what is the common word for it?

Interviewer: I’m not sure. It’s just like sores or --

Herz: No, well, it is caused by an insect, by a parasite, a parasitic insect. We all had it then. We had very little to eat, and yet we were forced to work. The work was 12 hours per day. In our emaciated condition, we just dragged ourselves through that. And the Germans had an ingenious way of doing this. Rather than having us to load into this underground tunnel where the work was performed, to go there from our barracks, the Germans had a small spur railroad. Well, fairly large wagons in there. Wagons were open. They had open doors. We were assembled on the platform, a huge, long platform, maybe 300, 400 feet long and very wide, a wooden platform. And this is the ingenious thing. The Germans ran their cars at a fast pace past this platform. We were to jump on while the cars were moving. There wasn’t luckily much room between there, so most of us made it into this moving railroad car, and we were standing up in there, something like about 150 to 100 people in a car. And that car took us underground where the manufacture of the Messerschmitts was being done, and I was assigned an old German prisoner who was the master welder. And of course, I didn’t do any welding whatever. I dragged those heavy aluminum wingspans, whatever it is, body parts to him, and we had to hold them, and another party held another wing part, and he would run his spot-welding machine on there.

It was excruciating work. My number in there -- we were given a piece of a piece of stamped-out material like the backside of a tomato can. It was fastened with two wires, and it had our numbers stamped on. My number was 134,314, which I took to be an omen of some sort. We were already believing in anything that might save us from perdition. So my number was pi -- or “pee,” “pie” [phonetic]?

Interviewer: “Pi.”

Herz: “Pi.” My number was pi: 134,314. I believed that -- I don’t know. Since I did not believe in a merciful, just God any longer, I believed that that would save me. I don’t know why, but it was sort of an anchor to hang onto. And while I was in this airplane factor, sometimes they didn’t have the parts and would take scrap pieces of aluminum, and the first thing I did was get rid of that. I polished a small piece of aluminum, and I engraved in there with a chisel my camp number. It was permitted to do that. I had some airplane fasteners, and I fastened this in a real fine-looking identification bracelet. As you know, Auschwitz had this number, but Sachsenhausen had the tag. But there, we had two methods of showing that we were prisoners. Our hair was permitted to grow out, I would say, an inch. And through this middle ran a stripe of shorn scalp. Here in American it would be a novelty that high school boys would do just to be different. Over there it was one of the most degrading things that we had to submit to. To have had hair -- you have hair. We comb our hair. We wash our hair. Over there, hair were permitted only in a short crew cut by the Kapos. Everyone else was either shorn, as in Sachsenhausen, or in Auschwitz was shorn, or, as in Mauthausen, with this stripe of about 3 inches wide of naked scalp showing amongst it. Can you visualize a thing like that? So that and the bracelet identified us as prisoners. I think we’d also have sometimes a number. The clothing we had were no longer prison clothing because the German prison factory, weaving factory, could no longer keep up. The factories were destroyed, so whatever old piece of garment there was, we got it holey. It didn’t make any difference.

So we worked in this factory, and on Wednesday afternoon, we had our treat. They had a sweet noodle soup that we lived for from week to week. We worked 12 hours a day. I think I’ve mentioned that, and we worked 6 days a week. Sunday, we had, again, all the *Schikanen* -- I don’t know how that would work -- all the petty annoyances that they could visit on us. And there also I saw something -- again, I’m not telling you this from hearsay. In the bitterest of bitter nights, there were some German Kapos, building-block Kapos that were dissatisfied with the skeletons, the living skeletons in their barracks, and they forced them -- five or six German, well-fed Kapos forced a group of about 200 of these starved skeletons out into the snow and did not let them into the barracks any longer. And there I have never heard anything like -- well, I can’t say I never heard anything like it. One of the things that I have never heard like it is this, the dying of those 200 people, especially since they were right across from us. There was nothing we could do to help. We had our beds. We had our bare clothing. The barracks were kept warm for the Kapos, not boiling warm, but warm enough for them, and there were all these poor souls sitting out there in the snow, and they died from about nine o’clock till about seven o’clock the next morning. The next morning, the last scream, the last whimper... And then they were again arranged outside the barracks, nicely in neat German rows, to be able to have counted them, and that was the end of that.

In the evening also we were treated to other things. The people that were executed while at work because they did not work very hard or couldn’t work very hard, they had a very simple method of execution. The SS guard had a guardroom inside the tunnel, and they had a sturdy nail in there. And since most of these living skeletons had no longer any resistance in there, if the German Kapo, the work Kapo said this guy is not working, he simply dragged the skeleton to the SS guard chamber, where the SS -- I witnessed this once, but I was beyond caring at that time. I thought it was something -- it was an everyday occurrence where the SS guards simply took a rope, tied it around the person’s neck -- the man didn’t even have the strength to object to it -- and just looped it around the nail and pulled the man up. There were no women. Pulled the man up until the man was -- until the person was dead. And at night, these people were brought back into the camp, and you could see a blue mark around their neck that you knew that they had been executed, hanged by the Germans. That’s one thing that the Germans did not delegate to the Kapos. They did the killing themselves.

One other thing was an act of desperation that occurred frequently in those last days that had occurred in many camps. It was a term that we called *Ich gehe an den Draht.*  “I am going to the wire.” In the last desperation of the soul, they wanted to make an end of it, and they couldn’t make an end of it unless they did something that was totally forbidden, maybe approaching the wire and touching the wire. Touching the wire meant that you meant to escape. It was -- I wouldn’t call it a euphemism. It was a rationale that maybe the Germans used to justify killing someone in cold blood from the guard tower. I witnessed this three to four times in Mauthausen -- in Gusen rather. I had not witnessed this before. It happened. In desperation, your friend or your last acquaintance would say, “I can’t stand it anymore. I am going to the wire.” And they would go to the wire and touch the wire, and the shot would come, and the Germans were excellent marksmen, and it did take but one shot, and that was the end of the suffering for that person.

I do not know whether I have ever been driven to that extremity. I will tell you one more thing that I have not admitted to anyone that I’ve ever talked to because I still had feelings, and I still was a 20-year-old. At the time, in our camp, or in Gusen, there were a group of German prison inmates, concentration camp inmates. They were Germans. They had either deserted or had done something that merited them being in the concentration camp. One of the crimes was having sexual intercourse with an inferior; in this case, a Polack. They called them Polack. Actually, we just -- a person was a Pole. But Polack was, in German terms, a derogatory term, like Jew or nigger. Polack for a German meant inferior human beings. Nevertheless, the Polish people called themselves, *“Czy ty Polack?”* “Are you Polish?” It happens to be -- it happens just a word -- the Polish word for “Polish.”So they were in the camps for that reason. If they were not Kapos, they were spared the work details. They had sort of a privileged occupation. And one day they were issued Afrika Korps -- you heard of the term “Afrika Korps”? Afrika Korps gear, the khaki jackets and the khaki pants, khaki hats. And they were selected to be redeemed in the last stand of the German -- they were supposed to be making a -- to be re, re -- how do you call it? Rehabilitated into the German military. And when I saw that, I was at the end -- we are talking about two months before war’s end. I was so -- my humanity was so debased that I felt that would the Germans asked me to fight in their ranks, I would have done it. Can you understand that?

Interviewer: Not really.

Herz: You can’t? It was the end. In order to get out, in order to have a life, to have dignity, I felt, I’ll do it, even if they had been my tormentors. I must have been at the end. I said I’ve never admitted that, but I felt that way. It didn’t come to that.

About the 24th or 25th of April, the underground factory started to destroy documents, and we destroyed documents. We knew then that the end was near, and yet our death was just as near because we knew that if they assembled us underground and blasted the entrance, there was no way for us to get out. We were some 600, 700 feet under a -- the tunnel was, at level ground, into the mountain, but the mountain was raised about 800, 900 feet above us, a massive rock -- well, just a mountain. And so if they had simply dynamited that -- maybe they did not have any dynamite. I cannot tell. At the end, we were about -- about the 20th to the 23rd of April, 24th of April, the first Red Cross packages began to arrive, and one more thing happened. The SS disappeared. They folded their tents and silently stole away and were replaced by Austrian police, military police, which guarded the camp from then on. We still couldn’t get out. We still were prisoners, but there was no more work. Some food came in, not very much, and we are now approaching the end of the...

Whatever it is, I don’t find the word for what the end is. The odyssey. It was not even an odyssey. The odyssey was a lot easier for the Greeks than our trip through hell. On May the 5th, a tank came up to the gates -- not to the gates -- to the barbed wire area where my barracks was located, and the conversation -- I was nearby. The conversation was in Yiddish, which by that time I understood perfectly well and spoke it. And some English was spoken also, and he said, “We are the American army. Your camp is being liberated. Stay here. You will get soup. The soup column is right behind you, but stay here. Stay here. We ask you to stay here.” But he was the only one there. Behind him were some jeeps and trucks, and they collected the military police, the Austrian military police, which was not connected to the -- which was not the SS troops, and their weapons were thrown on a pile and set afire by the American troops. Somebody still had the presence of mind to ask how come he spoke Yiddish. He says, “Well, I am a Jew from Brooklyn, New York.” We didn’t know Brooklyn from New York, but he spoke Yiddish very badly, very poor Yiddish, but nevertheless, he says, “You are free. The American army is behind me, but stay in the camp so that there is not -- none of this confusion that might come on. We assure you, you will be fed.”

Well, the first adventurous Russian prisoners, when they saw the Americans, got their revenge on their German Kapos, and this time, it was corroborated by Mr. West. They hanged the German Kapos, as many German Kapos as they could get a hold of. They killed probably three or four in my barracks. It was something that I -- I was incapable of feeling any sentiments. I didn’t feel any pity with them. My torment had ended. I did not care any longer. I felt truly like a bird who has flown out of a cage. I did not know what the future would bring. I did walk by the pile of burning weapons to see whether I could get a pistol out of there or a rifle or anything, but the metal was so hot that I could not touch anything. I burned myself on the fingers, and I got out. That is where the -- my story ends.

Interviewer: Where did you go after liberation?

Herz: I tried to go back to Germany. I tried to find my way back home. And there were many, many ex-concentration camp inmates plus *Flüchtlinge* or *Vertrieben,* as the Germans called them, “displaced persons,” Hungarians that had been dragged into Germany to work, Polish people. The whole countryside, this was the very last countryside in Germany where everybody had concentrated to try and get away, either from the Russians or from the Americans or from the British or whatever it is, everybody concentrated on the southern, Austrian part of Germany where I was. We knew where Linz was, a city nearby. I made my way to Linz. I went to a hospital which -- they had to take us. I don’t know whether they had room or there weren’t very many civilian casualties, and I was admitted, where they, first of all, treated the scabies, which had by now enveloped my entire body. And after I got out of there, we all tried then to make our way back into civilization, into life. We had some food. Again, I narrowly escaped from being shot by an American soldier. I had discovered a grain storage depository, and I went there and got grain, which the Germans would trade me for something else. They would grind it up and make flour out of it. The second time I did that, some black American GI started to point his rifle at me, and in my poor English, the poorest of poor English, I finally made him understand what had happened to me and --

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