Magda Katzenstein

Memories of the Holocaust

A young Czech woman
who survived World War II

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It is permitted and recommended to distribute this book, in order to fulfill the request of Magda's mother, as she said to her before she went to the gas chamber: "you must get out of here and tell your brothers and sisters what we went through". In order for people, especially the youth, to recognize and remember the terrible period, many do not understand what a happy time they live today, when everyone can fulfill their wishes and desires.

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I would be happy to receive corrections, comments, clarifications, suggestions and completions.

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German occupation of Czechoslovakia

When the German army invaded Czechoslovakia in March 1939, I was seventeen and a half. I was studying in the twelfth grade in the city of Ostrava, some 20km from my home town Frýdek-Místek in Moravia. In our town there were about 10,000 inhabitants, 2,000 of whom were German. The Jewish community consisted of 400 people, mostly German speaking.

On the 14th of March 1939 in the evening I was riding my bicycle back from visiting a girlfriend with whom I did my homework, when I suddenly heard a single shot. When I arrived home, I found my sister Lore with her husband and daughter, Eva, who was then a one and a half year old baby. They lived in Slovakia, from where her husband, Willy Quitt, came from. I had no idea they were going to come. As it happened, they had escaped due to fear of anti-Semitism in Slovakia (then ruled by Josef Tiso who had anti-Semitic tendencies).

On that very evening, we were looking out of the window, when suddenly we saw rows of soldiers. We understood that it was not our army, and became very nervous.
That same night our synagogue, some 200 meters from our home, was set on fire.

What was the meaning of this one shot?

The Czecho-Slovakian government knew it could do nothing against the German army, and the Czecho-Slovakian army did not oppose the entry of the Germans. However, the government did not have time to instruct all the soldiers, and a soldier who stood alone at the gate, fired one single shot. This, in fact, was the first and last shot fired by the Czech army.

After that eventful evening, we finally managed to go to sleep. Little Eva slept next to me. I was suddenly woken up by a strong explosion and immediately understood that stones were being thrown at us, which almost hit little Eva. Next morning Lore and her husband wanted to leave. They had not intended to come for only one night, but they preferred anti-Semitism to the German army. They had to get a permit from the German headquarters to return to Slovakia. [1] After they got it, they returned to Slovakia.

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[1] A little history (from the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust. Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.):
The First Czecho-Slovak Republic had been established after World War I, on October 28, 1918, after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The Second Czechoslovak Republic, the rump state created in the wake of the MUNICH CONFERENCE (September 28-29, 1938) and the German annexation of the Sudeten-land, came to an abrupt end. After the German invasion, Bohemia and Moravia, the heartland of the historic Czech lands, became part of the territory of the Reich, followed by annexation of Czech territories by Hungary and Poland as well. Slovakia and Carpato obtained full autonomy, and the first Czecho-Slovak Republic came to an end. The second republic lasted only five months. In mid-March-1939, a Czech-Slovak crisis broke out, and encouraged by the Germans, the prime minister of the autonomous Slovakia, Josef Tiso, declared the independence of his country.
Next morning, on March 15th, 1939, the Germans completed the invasion of the entire Czech territory, thus putting an end to the second Czech republic. On March 16th Hitler declared Germany's Protectorate ever the Czech country, giving its provinces, Bohemia and Moravia, German names, while Carpato Rotnia was annexed by Hungary. Bohemia and Moravia became, in fact, part of the German Reich. See **Figure 3**.

My father had a factory that produced alcoholic drinks, jam, canned fruit and vegetables. On March 17th, a man came to my father's factory presenting German papers. He had received a power of attorney to manage the factory. This function was called "Arisator", which is transferring Jewish property to Aryan hands.

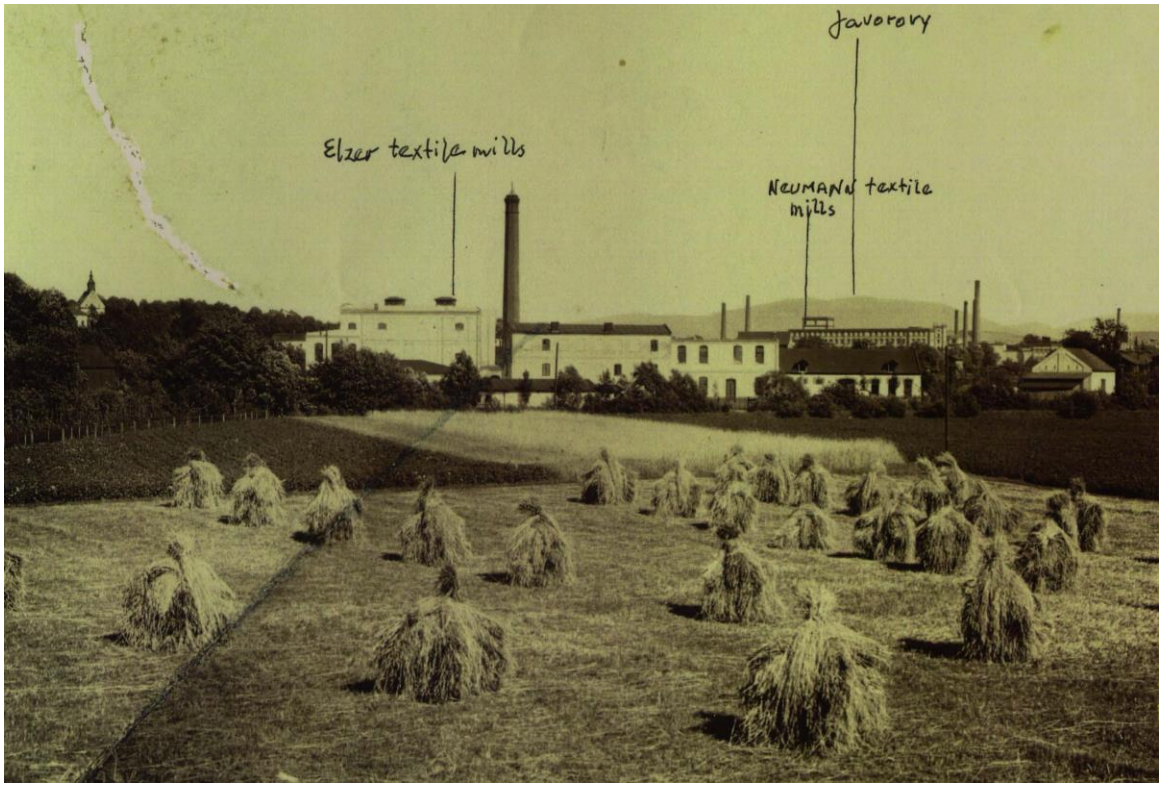

Figure 1: Our fields and factory

A few days later, some of us pupils wanted to go back to school in Ostrava. At the high school entrance there was a sign: "Entrance to Jews forbidden", which prevented me from attending the matriculation examinations in June 1939. The teaching language at high school was German and 40% of the pupils were Jewish.

The following months passed peacefully, except for the fact that the Jews had to give up valuable property: Jewelry, radios, furs, etc. Then they were forbidden entry to cinemas, coffee shops and parks. These acts were intended to restrict their freedom of movement and harass them.

On September 1st 1939, the Germans invaded Poland and the war began. Our house stood in a central place and the army had to pass it. Endless rows of soldiers, tanks and lorries of the German army entered Poland. This went on until October, when the conquest of Poland was completed.

In mid-October 1939 there were rumors that men from our neighborhood were going to be transported to Poland. When father heard this, he took the first train to Prague. Later he was

told that it had been the last train which had not been checked by the Germans. After that the trains were searched and the Jewish men were sent back.

Men between 15 and 60 from the area of Ostrava were sent to Nisko in Poland. They were told to take tools with them in order to build a work camp there. They arrived at an entirely empty spot. Some of them died of cold and hunger, some managed to escape to Russia, and some managed to return to Ostrava.

Several days later, my mother and I locked the house and went to Prague. The factory was being run by that man who was authorized by the Germans. As far as I remember, father still received a salary.

A less important chapter in my life was that I got married, against the will of my parents, on February 27th 1939 to a Gentile from Mystek (a non-Jewish man, law student, whose name was Gustav Jan Mückstein). My parents rented an apartment in Prague, and my husband and I also rented a room. We divorced after 18 months, when he realized the handicap of a Jewish wife.

In Prague, I followed courses of the Jewish community. There were a lot of courses, because everybody planned to emigrate and looked for professions they could work in. At that time there were no longer a lot of emigration possibilities. I took a course of baby nurses which took place in a baby care home. My mother took a Jewelry course. Afterward I continued in a kindergarten teachers course, which I did not finish, since the Germans shut down all the courses of the Jewish community at the beginning of 1941.

I worked at the nursery school of the Jewish community until the expulsion to Ghetto Terezin. The only place to stroll to was the cemetery. We used to walk there with the little children. I used to take two, three children on my arms and walk one kilometer for the kids to see some nature. The Jewish cemetery was founded in 1439 and it is the most ancient in central Europe.

At that time the Germans conquered more and more countries, Jews lived on rumors.

In 1941 started the business with the yellow star. Then people had to share apartments. My parents had to leave their apartment and move in with another family. There were areas where Jews were forbidden to live. The atmosphere became more and more gloomy. At that time shortage of food items, coal for heating the apartments, etc, was already occuring. Food coupons were distributed, with lesser rations to Jews.

When I was 18, at the beginning of the war, there were:

- My sister Käthe [age 20] (Katia Gould) - in England
- My brother Hans [age 22] - a soldier in the Czech army, released and managed to emigrate to England before the war broke out
- My sister Lore [age 24] (Quitt) - in Slovakia
- My brother Hermann [age 25] - who escaped to England the night after March 14th 1939, or maybe a few days later (I do not remember exactly)

Figure 2: Katia, father Heinrich[2], Magda, mother Mizzi[3], Hermann, baby Eva, Lore and Willy (Oct 1938)

Meanwhile, my sister Lore sent someone to smuggle us to the Slovakian border. My father got frightened at the last moment and gave up the idea. Lore sent us someone twice to smuggle us to Slovakia, but he always returned empty handed because father was afraid we would be caught.

In October 1941, the first five transports were sent from Prague to ghetto Lodz. Most of them were Jews, who lived in Czechoslovakia. Within a few hours the people were transported and never seen again.

At that time the idea of Ghetto Terezin[4] began. The Germans asked the Jewish leadership to find a place to concentrate the Jews (at that time most of the Jews in Poland lived in ghettoes and there were rumors about executions by shooting).

Jakob Edelstein, who was among the main figures of the Zionist leadership, jumped to the occasion, thinking it would be good for the Jews in Czechoslovakia to have a place to concentrate in until the end of the war, so as not to have to be transported to Poland in the East.

The Germans checked a few places and decided on Terezin. Why?

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[2] Jindřich in Czech.

[3] Marie, nickname Mizzi (I use both names synonymously).

[4] Theresienstadt in German, Terezín in Czech (I use both terms synonymously).

Because it was a fortified city surrounded by walls. The Austrians fortified it in the 18th century against the Prussians. There was always an army there - this time it was the German army**.** The buildings hosting the army were huge and the scarce civil population actually served-the military.

In November 1941 the first transport was sent to Terezin. This was a pioneer transport - only young men, to prepare the camp. There was still a Czech population there and all contact with them was forbidden. The soldiers were evacuated from the buildings.

From this time on, transports were sent from the entire Czech Protectorate and later on also from Germany, Austria, Holland and Denmark.

It was forbidden to send letters from Terezin. We were fed by rumors. People started to get ready for the camp: Prepared solid fat, thickening in jars, sewed money into the clothes and bought everything and any item that could be used in the camp. No one knew when his turn would come.

Each person who was called up to be transported (the lists were with the Jewish community) had to hand over his food coupons and the keys to his apartment. A luggage of up to 50 kg only was allowed, and it was forbidden to take money. The Jewish community was in charge of order at the call-up station and the entire organization.

The expelled carried luggage consisting of: suitcases, rucksacks, pots, chamber pots, tubs, sleeping bags, blankets, bed linen, etc. They also carried food, such as: caramel, thickening, and more. All these things turned out later to be very useful in Terezin, although part of the luggage was confiscated by the SS and sent to Germany.

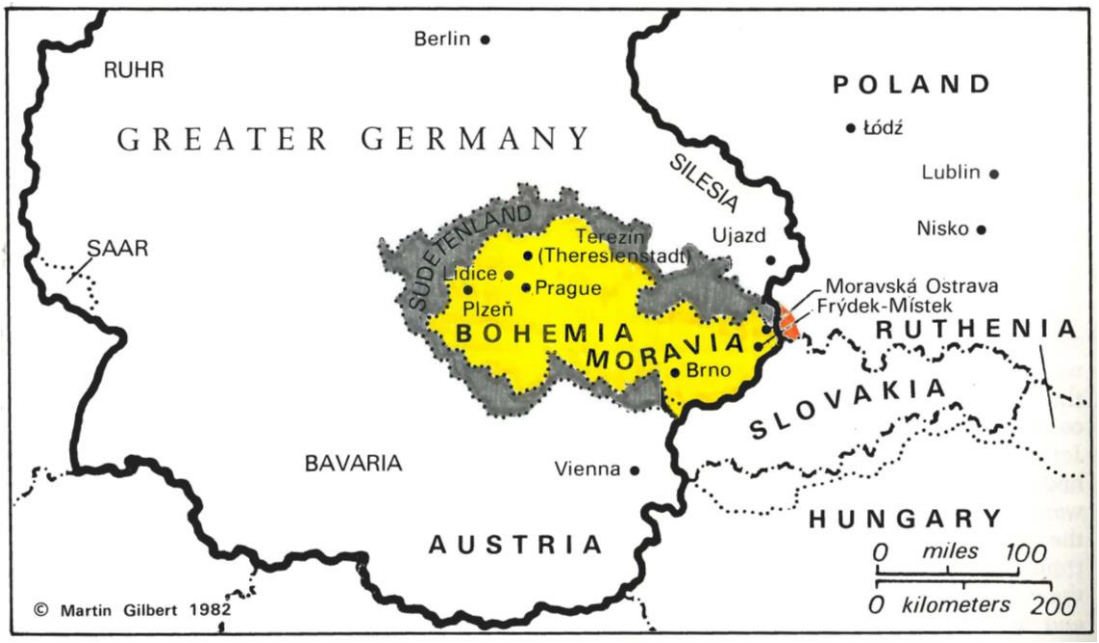


Figure 3: Map of the states in conflict, Bohemia and Moravia annexed on March 15th 1939.
(Map credit: Courtesy of Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.)

Figure 4: Heinrich and Mizzi Low

Figure 5: Herman and Hans (1927) Lore (1925) Katia and Magda (1926)

Ghetto Terezin

My parents received the call-up in July 1942. I did not live with my parents at that time.

One had to walk to the call-up station. I remember the Czechs standing aside, partly glad, watching the people being transported. I remained two more months in Prague.

One day I received a letter from my mother in my post box (she bribed a Czech policeman to send it). It said I should take a certain seamstress to help me get ready for the camp (the seamstress was a gentile married to a Jew, and she had helped my mother to prepare for the camp). At the end of the letter it read: "From here people are being transported to the East, therefore, if you come here, do everything you can to stay here".

On September 12th 1942 I was called up. I immediately took the seamstress recommended by my mother, and gave her money to sew into my clothes. (I paid much attention to the part about the seamstress in my mother's letter, and almost forgot what was written at the end). The seamstress came to my home and I went to do some errands. I asked her to prepare me also caramel and thickening in jars. When I returned, she asked me to feel the bills she had sewn into my bras and skirts.

Next evening, before going to the transport station, I looked for the food coupons, which I had to return, and I could not find them. I became suspicious. I looked inside my rucksack and saw no thickening and no caramel. I looked further, and then, instead of money, I found newspaper bits inside my bra and the other hiding places. I was in panic, especially because of the food coupons I had to return.

Suddenly I heard her voice. She came to apologize for mistakenly putting the food coupons into her purse. She became terribly afraid and therefore returned the coupons. Her conscience must have troubled her. I started to shout at her and cried, but she threatened me to tell me to the Gestapo if I do something about the money and the food stuff she had stolen.[5]

The main thing was, I had my coupons.

Next morning, I came to the call-up station, and stayed there for six weeks. I do not know the reason we had to stay there for so long. It was a big building, which used to serve for international fairs. The premises were large (like the Exhibition grounds in Tel-Aviv).

We slept on the floor. It was September-October, not so cold yet. There were many young folks, a few old ones and an entire mental institution from Prague (Jews). I started looking after the old and the children. We received food from the Jewish community and did not yet suffer hunger. We young people were in a good mood.

5 After the war my brother, Hans, went to this seamstress in his officer's uniform. She shook all over from fear. She begged for mercy and gave my brother back all the money she had stolen from me.

On October 28th 1942 we walked again to the train station and traveled to Terezin. Then there were still railroad cars (not animal ones). A transport from Vienna also joined the train, and from there, too, came a group of mentally sick people.

Life was not normal for the Czechs either - there was war, curfew at night, rationed food and scary rumors. It was known that the Germans are doing fine in their war.

At the evening we arrived at the Bohusovice train station, the nearest one to Terezin (Terezin had no station yet). From there we walked three kilometers to the camp, with all our luggage.

It was already dark when we arrived. We were put in a very big cellar of the barracks. The cellar had several exits and entries occupied by ghetto officials and also by Czech country policemen. The organization inside the camp was in the hands of the Judenrat. The cellar was dark and in utter turmoil. People entered and left in a hurry and the atmosphere was hysterical.

We were told to sit near our luggage and wait.

Suddenly a Jewish official came in and started reading names. All those whose names were called had to take their luggage and go out. Most of the names were of the young. All of a sudden, I remembered what my mother wrote to me at the end of the letter she had sent me, and I thought to myself: "Maybe these people are called up to be sent to the east?" At that moment my name was called. I did not answer. The friends near me said: "They are calling your name!" I remained seated. There was total disorder. Suddenly I saw that from our transport mothers and babies were all leaving together through the back door. That very moment I took my things and joined those mothers.

I found myself in the ghetto outside the cellar. They led us to some building and let us lie on the floor with straw.

Next morning, I went to look for my mother, who was in a barrack called Hamburg.

Later it became known that a transport was, in fact, sent East that night, and I was lucky not to have joined it. From that transport of 2,000 people only 28 survived. It was, in fact, the first transport that left ghetto Terezin to the Auschwitz extermination camp. Several scores of youngsters from our transport were added to it, so as to count 2,000 people.

I found my mother and she took me to Edelstein, the head of the Judenrat. My mother had been chairperson of WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Organization, in our city and in good relations with Edelstein. He sent me to work in the children's house. It was called L-318[6], for children age 6 - 10.

This children house was situated in a building, which used to be a school for Czech children. (The Czech population had been evacuated from there already in 1942).

[6] L = long-wise street, 3 = third street, 18 = house number; click next link for Map of Theresienstadt Ghetto: https://www.scrapbookpages.com/CzechRepublic/Theresienstadt/TheresienstadtGhetto/GhettoTour/Map.html

Each class consisted of one group of children. I was the nursemaid of a group of twenty-three children aged 6 - 7.

A teacher named Hanka used to work with me. The class was set up with two stories of wooden bunks and straw mattresses. In the middle stood a long table and benches. Hanka and I took shifts sleeping with the children, one week I and one week she. The week we did not spend with the children we slept in the nurses' room where we had a common bed.

My job was to be like a mother to the children and especially, to be very careful about cleanliness. There were fleas to exterminate. The children used to scream at night for fear of fleas. There were bedbugs in the bunks and every day the mattresses had to be taken out to be aired and beaten, so that the bedbugs would leave. I used to do that. I used to wash the children with cold water under a tap.

Then there were lice, and it was my job to delouse the children daily.

And, of course, we had to feed the children. The Jewish leadership provided slightly better food for the children. But mainly we had to give them a lot of love and attention.

There was one child I loved most, Ernsti Chaimowitsch. I will never forget him. His sister, eight years old, was one of the first victims of the stomach typhoid epidemic which befell the children.

In the mornings, Hanka, the teacher, used to teach the children (in Czech). It was strictly forbidden to teach, therefore we were under guard. Each time a German or Czech guard came close, we gave the children a sign and they started singing.

The children had brought toys with them and they used to play. We would go for walks inside the ghetto, and sometimes, when the ghetto headquarters gave permission, we went up to the walls which were thick enough to walk on. The children were like one family, with bonds of love between them.

All the children were orphans, except one, whose parents were in the ghetto. Some of them arrived from the orphanage in Prague. Some of the orphans' parents were transported in October 1941 from Prague to the East, to ghetto Lodz, and preferred to leave their children with relatives or in the orphanage in Prague.

We had a wonderful sport instructor called Fredy Hirsch. He was a German Jew who had escaped to Czechoslovakia when Hitler came to power in Germany. Fredy knew how to obtain favors from the Germans. The Germans allowed us to celebrate spring on the walls. There were wild plants and flowers growing there, so we could enjoy seeing some green.

We taught the group to sing:

We are small flowers

giving a lot of scent

we have tiny heads

children look us up

enjoying how good we smell

we thank the good sun

for warming our small heads.

This scene was very moving. All the ghetto children were there and it was a big and very touching celebration. Each group of children played a different part. The sun shone and there was a pleasant breeze. We were happy. It was spring 1943.

Two and a half months after I arrived at Terezin I was called up to be transported, meaning, I was included to be on a transport.

(The nurses constantly changed because of the transports). My mother had a friend from our city who worked as a nurse, and she told my mother she would help me. She injected milk into me, so that my body temperature would rise.

And, in fact, it reached 41 degrees Celsius. With that temperature I arrived at the gathering cellar for the transport. (It was the first out of five transports which were due to leave). There, at the gathering spot, there was a doctor from the ghetto. The sick had to report to him, and he was authorized to leave the very sick behind and release them from being transported.

The nurse who gave me the injection knew about these arrangements and instructed me. (Fifty people above quota were always summoned to be transported).

I was then twenty-one. I went to the doctor and told him I had a fever. He examined me and probably understood what I did. He looked at me for a few seconds and said: "You look like an advertisement for Zeiss Ikon" (a German factory for the manufacturing of looking glasses). I wore glasses from the age of twelve. The doctor sent me to the sick ward. Some twenty people were lying there. A transport left every two days. The doctor let me stay for ten days, and thus saved my life (he himself did not survive).

After ten days, this nice doctor released me and I returned to the children’s home.

At a later stage, I came down with an infectious hepatitis. I was sent to hospital - a barrack turned into a hospital. They had very good Czech doctors there. One of them was a friend of mine, who came to visit me. Also, a very good girlfriend of mine worked there as a nurse. I was sick for a long time. My body was very weak from the illness, and my girlfriend fell in love with my friend the doctor (our affair had been over). When I recovered, I went back to work with the children and got recurrent hepatitis. I do not remember if I was hospitalized then. The first time my skin was lemon color. The second-time it turned orange.

Life in Ghetto Terezin

Then there was a period without transports, and we had hope. We heard rumors about the war from people who arrived on new transports.

At first, the dead were buried. When scores and dozens of people started to die every day, they could not be buried anymore and had to be burnt. A crematorium was built to burn the corpses.

Carts for corpses were sent to Terezin from the Jewish communities. Everything that had to be-delivered or transferred in Terezin was delivered on these corpse carts, mainly food items: bread, sacks with flour, etc. Everything except dead bodies. Instead of horses they used people.

In June 1943 my cousin Kurt arrived. He was 15. His father, Paul, was sent from Terezin to Treblinka and we had no sign of life from him.

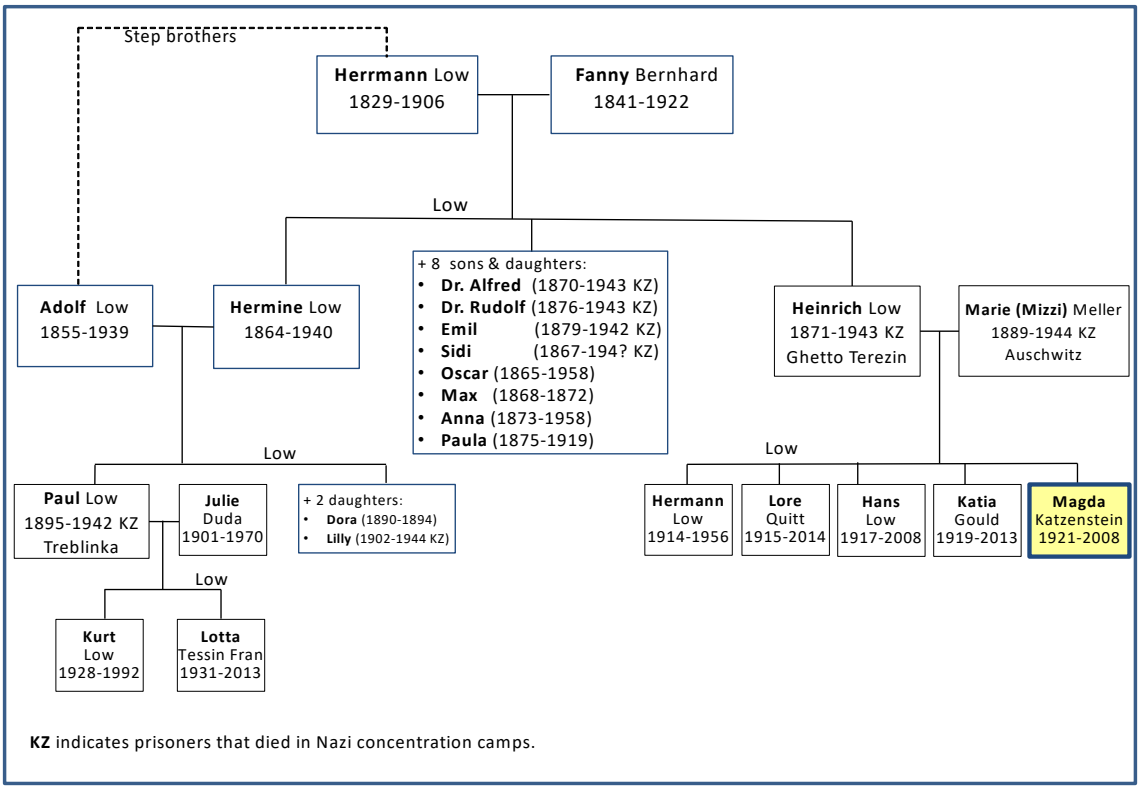
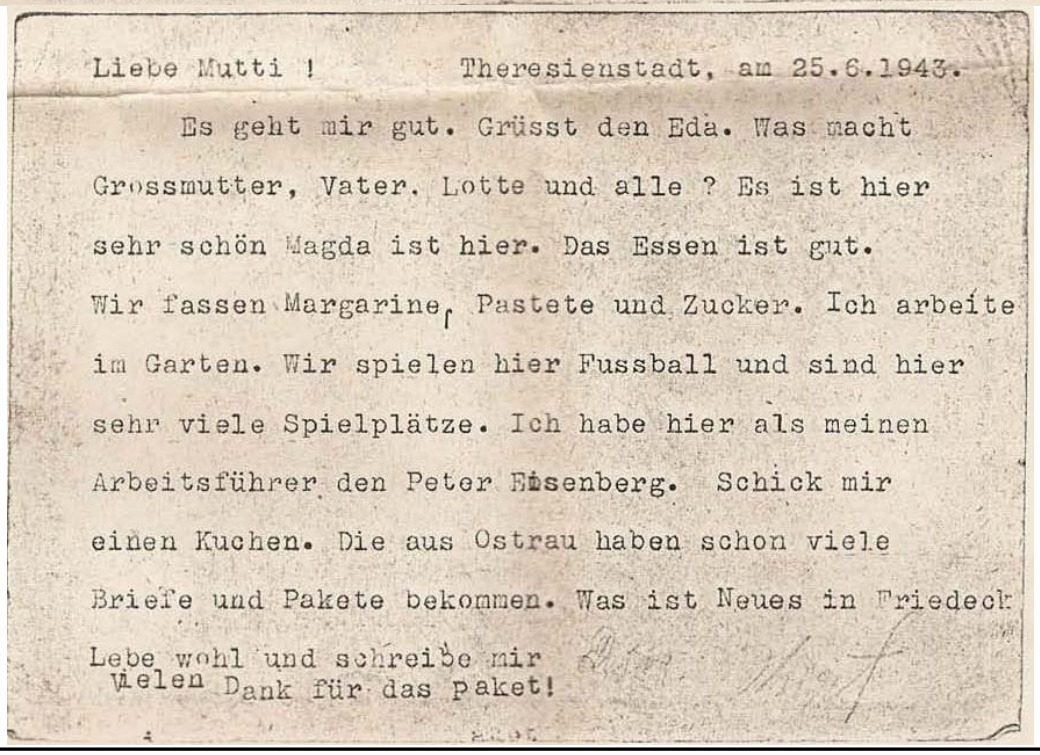


Figure 6: Löw family tree

My cousin's family:

Hermine, my father's sister, married Adolf, my grandfather's stepbrother. Paul, their son, married a Christian, Julie, who worked as a clerk in our factory. They had a daughter named Lotta and a son named Kurt. Kurt wrote memories which were translated by me from Czech into Hebrew. Paul got divorced from his Christian wife in order to protect his children, but the Nazis sent his son, Kurt, to Terezin, Auschwitz and Dachau. Paul was killed by gas in Treblinka on October 22nd 1942. Kurt survived. He returned from the war attained by tuberculosis, but recovered and lived in Frydek. Lotta hid with her Christian mother. She survived and lived in Frydek.



Liebe Mutti ! Theresienstadt, am 25.6.1943.

Es geht mir gut. Grüsst den Eda. Was macht Grossmutter, Vater. Lotte und alle ? Es ist hier sehr schön Magda ist hier. Das Essen ist gut. Wir fassen Margarine, Pastete und Zucker. Ich arbeite im Garten. Wir spielen hier Fussball und sind hier sehr viele Spielplätze. Ich habe hier als meinen Arbeitsführer den Peter Eisenberg. Schick mir einen Kuchen. Die aus Ostrau haben schon viele Briefe und Pakete bekommen. Was ist Neues in Friedeck

Lebe wohl und schreibe mir
Vielen Dank für das paket!

Kurt

Dear Mum! Theresienstadt, June 25th 1943

I'm fine. Greet from Eda. What is grandmother doing, father, Lotte and all other? It is very beautiful here. **Magda** is here. The food is good. We take margarine, pate and sugar. I work in the garden. We play football here and here are a lot of playgrounds. I have mine here. Labor leader here is Peter Eisenberg. Send me a cake. Those from Ostrava have already received many letters and parcels. What's new in Frydek?

Love and write me. Thank you for the package! Kurt

Figure 7: A letter from my cousin Kurt to his mother Julie (Terezin, June 25th 1943)

My mother, aged 53, worked in the sick ward kitchen and lived in a big hall of a women's barrack. My father was seventy when he arrived at the ghetto. He lived in the barrack of the old. Apart from my father, his two brothers from Vienna were also in the ghetto.

The sanitary conditions were appalling. People of that age were afraid to wash in cold water. There were few lavatories, and people no longer watched over cleanliness. Food was scarce, and in order to get it, one had to stand in line for hours. The residents of the barracks for the old often suffered from diarrhea. Their bodies weakened considerably and became vulnerable for infectious diseases. Most of the people died of pneumonia, as a result of weakness.

That was how my first uncle, Dr. Rudolf Löw, my father's brother, died in March 1943. Rudolf was 67 when he died. He was an important personality and had an important function – Head of Austrian finance ministry attorney general (main procurator at finance ministry) in Vienna.

The more important people (from Germany and Austria), were brought to Terezin because it was considered a better ghetto.

In May 1943 my father, Heinrich Löw, died from pneumonia at the age of 71. He lay on his death bed for three, four days, without regaining consciousness.

The second uncle, Dr. Alfred Löw, was a judge and president of the Austrian supreme court. He died after him, in December 1943, at the age of 73.

They all died from the same cause: severe diarrhea and pneumonia. Their important positions were not taken into consideration – only their being Jewish counted. A reminder to us Jews, Israelis and those that chase after positions abroad, we have no other country than Israel.

We had to stand in line for a long time in order to get our food rations. We stood in the cold, rain, snow and also in the burning sun in summer. Many old people collapsed while waiting.

In my spare time I could visit mother and father and help them. Especially father. Mother managed quite well.

There was constant fear of being transported to the East.

Edelstein was convinced that we had to work in Terezin and contribute to the war effort of the Germans, in order to remain in the ghetto till the war ends. In fact, it was a mirage, since most of the Jews in the Protectorate were later sent to the East to be exterminated in the camps, and only a few survived in the ghetto till the end.

The Judenrat had to prepare the lists for the transports. Sometimes they were ordered to send young people and sometimes old. They were all human beings, and the Judenrat was, of course, in a dilemma, deciding who to send and who will stay. There was, of course, favoritism.

As long as Edelstein was the chairman, my parents stayed in the ghetto, until Edelstein was detained in the bunker in November 1943 (see later).

In Terezin everybody worked, whether to maintain the ghetto or for the Germans - for their war effort. People worked from the age of 16. Those who worked received an additional food supply.

Guarding the ghetto was in the hands of Jewish policemen, supervised by Czech policemen, and outside, all around, were SS men that controlled occasionally.

Nothing was heard from the people who were sent to the East, it was as if the earth had swallowed them. We did not know about the crematoria and the extermination.

In the summer month there was a bed-bug plague. They hid in the wooden bunks and came out at night in thousands, attacking us and sucking our blood. Most people preferred to sleep outside in the courtyards. We thought there could not be a plague worse than this one.

Figure 8: A street in the dense ghetto, shops for mirage purposes.
Drawing by Felix Bloch, 1898 - 1944 KZ Ghetto Terezin.
(1168.04.05.jpg credit: Courtesy of Beit Theresienstadt, Kibbutz Givat-Hayim Ichud, Israel)

The children outside the ghetto

In August 1943 we noticed that they started to build huts on a small area near the ghetto. We did not know why they were building them.

Thus, one day, about 50 people, amongst them two doctors, instructors, nurses and nursemaids were notified that they had to go to the train station (which had already been built in Terezin), and wait there. Cooks had to bring food there for one thousand people.

In the evening a train arrived with children under 15. They were all skin and bones only, wearing rugs, barefoot and with their hair cut to the skin. They spoke Polish and Yiddish. The children ate eagerly. They were full of lice, and the team was asked to take care of them.

The children were told to go and wash themselves, because they had lice, but the older children started to shout: "Not to the showers, it's gas, it's gas, not to the showers!"

Those were the children of the Bialystok ghetto who the Germans wanted to exchange with German war prisoners or civilians detained by the Allies who fought against the Germans.
The instructors managed to get through to some of the children, who spoke about their parents going to the gas chambers to die.

Only then did the people in the ghetto learn about the gas showers and the crematoria. Of course, many questions were asked. Rumors spread, and some could not believe it. Who could believe such stories? Fredy Hirsch wanted very much to know what is happening with these "strange" children who have arrived. One of the times he snuck out, he was caught by SS men and sent on the following transport in September 1943 to the East. The children and the team were told by the Germans that they are being sent to Switzerland or to Palestine.

In the end something went wrong in the negotiations of the Germans with the Allies, and these children, whose hair began to grow and they looked better, were sent to Auschwitz together with the medical and educational team. However, not before receiving clean clothes and making them all believe they were going to Switzerland or to Palestine.

None of them survived. We learned about their extermination when we ourselves got to Auschwitz.

The summer months were a relatively quiet period, as there were no transports. During these months the Germans started their preparations for the "big show" to the Red Cross. For instance:

The Bank – it reopened and issued "ghetto money". All this was a mirage. Nothing could be bought with this money.

A store – was opened where items which had been stolen from the prisoners' suitcases were sold. The good items from the suitcases were sent to Germany. The "trash" was sold in the shop.

The coffee shop - there one could buy a cup of coffee with sweetener (so I was told. This occurred on July 23rd 1944. I was no longer in the ghetto by then).

On September 4th 1943 I was summoned to be transported, and my mother was very sad. I started to make preparations. My boyfriend[7] was on the list, therefore I was not so sad, and even somewhat glad. They always summoned more people than necessary. The following morning my notice to be transported was cancelled. I was not happy because of my boyfriend, but my mother was very happy.

On September 6th 1943 the transport left. Afterwards postcards started arriving. They all read: Birkenau, street name and house number. The wording was always the same: "Feeling well...". Some people tried to put in a few words in Hebrew, such as "Mavet" (Death - MSG), or that they wrote about a certain uncle who died: "Soon we will meet this uncle."

In German, the name Birkenau sounded very nice and pleasant. It means a wood of birch trees. But, in fact, it was the Auschwitz II camp, attached to Auschwitz I camp.

Figure 9: My parents, Mizzi (Marie) and Heinrich
on left: in their garden in October 1938, on right: in Prague in 1941.

[7] Unfortunately, we do not know his name.

The big roll call (Appell)

This was in November 1943.

From time to time the Germans used to check the lists of the Council of the Elderly. Their check at that date showed several irregularities, meaning that some people were missing. They accused Edelstein and declared a general roll call of the entire ghetto.

Everybody, except for the sick and the nurses had to report at a certain morning hour outside the walls, in an open area. Endless rows of people (about forty thousand) went there. Nobody knew for what purpose. We thought it might be another mass expulsion. Therefore, we dressed the children in layers of clothes, as it was winter already. We also took food with us from breakfast. Luckily it was a beautiful day. We saw something we had not seen for a long time - flowers and natural green grass.

We were told to stand five in a row. At first the children were glad. They could move around a little and even go and pee. There were many Jewish policemen around as well as SS men.

Around noon there was a call for attention, to stand in rows of five without moving. It was not allowed even to go and pee. Luckily we had a group of boys who could pee while standing. It started to get cold and rainy. The children became restless. The SS men went constantly from one row to the other counting and counting. It seemed their counting was not so successful. There was no way to discuss getting something to eat or drink. So we stood there, all the people from the ghetto, until ten o'clock at night!

Then they ordered everybody to be inside the walls within half an hour, and all those who would be found outside would be shot.

There was only one entrance gate. Panic started. It was impossible for so many people to pass it in such short time.

Hanka and I foresaw that something terrible was going to happen. Hanka took command: She got hold of one child and told him to get hold of another, in short, she told all the children to form a chain and hold each other very firmly. She paved a way through the crowd and I was the last one. That was how we managed to reach the gate of the ghetto. We were the first to arrive. The children did not let loose until we arrived at the children's house. When we arrived, we told the children: "We got home, now you may let go", and the children slowly loosened their grip of each other. The small hands showed marks of nails and blood.

This was how we were saved. Many people were run over that night.

Of all the children, only Tommy survived. Tommy's parents were in the ghetto, and managed to survive there until the liberation. All the others, including Hanka, were sent to Birkenau at the end of September 1944 and were exterminated that same day in the gas chambers. I heard about all this after the war. Unfortunately, I do not remember the family name of Tommy. (Tommy would be today, 2019, eighty-three.)

Edelstein was detained in the cellar. Another head was appointed to the Juderant, Dr. Paul Eppstein, a Jew from Germany.

At the beginning of December 1943 there were again rumors about transports.

On December 13th my mother was summoned to be transported (she was no longer protected by Edelstein). I declared that I volunteer to join her. They wrote my name down at the Judenrat, but they told me there were many volunteers, and it was not certain I could join that transport.

(There were always volunteers because the families had been separated. For instance, when the woman was called up, the husband volunteered.)

At that time my last uncle, Alfred Löw, died. My uncles always got parcels from Vienna in Austria. My mother took the parcel that had been sent to my uncle and said that we would eat all the goodies in it on our way to the East. We were supposed to leave on December 15th.

My father had a cousin whose husband, David, of the Reiss family, was on the council of the elderly. When he heard that I volunteered to leave on the transport, he came to me and begged me not to go. I asked him: "Why?" But he refused to tell me.

(The uncle did not survive. So that I could not ask him after the war why he did not tell me. They probably knew already in the council something about the mass extermination.)

Figure 10: **A memorial plaque to my uncle, Dr. Rudolf Löw, who was the Head of Austrian finance ministry attorney general (main procurator) in Vienna in 1929-1938.**
He was 67 when he died in Terezin in March-1943.
https://www.geschichtewiki.wien.gv.at/Gedenktafel_Karl_Lederer_und_Rudolf_L%C3%B6w

The trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau (December 15, 1943)

My mother divided the parcel in two. Half a fried chicken, cake, bread, jam and many other goodies. The cattle train was already at the train station. Everyone had to show the order received. The people who checked were Jews, of course. The volunteers were told to wait. My mother had already entered the wagon. Everyone could take a bag. The suitcases had to remain outside. They were put into the two last wagons.

The transport comprised 2,500 people.

We, the volunteers (50 people), were told to go into the equipment wagon, which was half full of suitcases. We had to sit on the suitcases, our heads touching the wagon ceiling. At that moment I no longer saw my bag, the same bag with the parcel my mother had divided in two. I was probably sitting on it, or someone else did. We all squeezed in. For many months in Auschwitz I still dreamt about that parcel.

Then they closed the wagon door. We sat in a row, and if someone had to obey nature's call, there was a bucket for that purpose. There was a small window of about 60x60 cm in the wagon. We passed the bucket with its contents from hand to hand, above everybody's head, up to the window. There, a friend of mine was sitting, who was responsible for emptying the bucket through the window. Apart from that, he managed to look outside, and told us what was happening there and the name of the stations, so that at a certain stage we knew, we were in Poland.

We traveled for about two and a half days.

Sometimes my friend tried to talk to the railroad workers, and then they would curse us in Polish "Dirty Jews". They used to tell us: "You are going to die", or "give me your watch, you are going to die anyway".

Sometimes we stopped somewhere for a long time, traveling backwards and then a little forward. (Those were war times, and the army, too, traveled by train.)

One evening or night we stopped for many hours. Then the train moved for five minutes and stopped.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

All that long way from Terezin we were in a dark wagon.

Suddenly the wagon door opened, and we found ourselves swept and blinded by reflector lights. There were shouts: "Heraus" (“Out” - in German)!

People were in shock. Everything was so sudden. Outside the train we saw people in pyjamas (prisoners’ clothes), their hair shaved to the skin, with sticks in their hands. They approached the wagons and started beating the people who came out. The wagons were high, and it was hard to step down. The young managed to jump down, but the older people and the children simply fell on top of each other. People wanted to take their bags, but they were shouted at: "Leave everything, leave everything"!

At that moment I thought to myself: What is this, a madhouse? People in pyjamas, and all this shouting. What a crazy place have I come to? We were blinded by the strong light.

They separated the men from the women. We were shouted at to stand in rows of five and march! We did not even know how lucky we were, since in general, the selection was made immediately upon coming down from the train, and the unfit for work were exterminated in the gas chambers on the same day.

Two days later another transport of 2,500 people arrived.

We started marching, and saw a gate on which was written: "Arbeit macht frei" (“Work liberates” - in German). This was the gate to the Auschwitz camp. We walked on the narrow path between the barracks and the barbed wire. The people there were wearing striped clothes. We did not understand at all what was going on. The women who had been already there for a long time looked mainly at the children (children were an unusual sight. They were always exterminated immediately upon arriving at Auschwitz.)

There were several buildings in the camp, called blocks. We were led to a block with three storey bunks. In the middle, prisoner women were sitting around a table. Polish and Slovaks, old-timers in the camp. They were the ones who burned the famous tattoo number into the arms of the new prisoners. Suddenly I discovered my mother on one of the third storey bunks. Those women had a list of the transport, and each one of us got a tattoo on her arm. I asked the girl who tattooed me: “What is this here?”, but she just showed with her hand as if to indicate that we were going to heaven, and said nothing. At that stage I did not understand what she meant.

My number was **71396.**

Then we had to line up again in rows of five. This time I could stand near my mother. We marched again, and now toward a building on which was written “SAUNA”, we entered a waiting room. There I got my first “initiation” to Auschwitz (specifically by a Jewish woman). We arrived in our clothes, my mother was wearing a leather coat with fur lining, a very beautiful coat.

In the sauna worked women prisoners. Suddenly, a young woman came to me. She spoke Slovak[8], and told us in a pleasant tone: “Get undressed now, take a shower, and leave your clothes here. Later you will get other clothes”. Then she turned to my mother: “Give me your coat, I’ll keep it for you and when you get your other clothes, I’ll return it to you”. I thanked her so for the way she treated my mother, and when I saw she had no watch, I gave her mine.

Then we went into real showers with cold water (it was December, with snow outside!). There were no towels, and after the cold shower we had to sit naked in a big hall. Thus we sat the entire night freezing from the cold.

We were surrounded by SS men with dogs. They probably enjoyed it very much to see us that way. The girls who worked there, too, laughed, together with the SS men.

In the morning the girls who worked there came with big baskets containing clothes (not the striped ones). And they started throwing clothes at each of us: underpants, dresses (regardless whether it was a summer dress or a dress with long sleeves), coats and shoes. I do not remember that we received socks. Some received two left shoes or two right ones. They evidently did not care to throw us clothes according to the women’s size. Small women received huge dresses, or vice versa. Later on we switched.

All that time I was looking for the girl who had taken my mother’s coat. Suddenly I saw her come into the hall. I went to her and said: “Could you give my mother her coat back?” And she answered: “What?!” I repeated: “Yes, a few hours ago you said you would return the coat, and I even gave you a watch!” She: “What, what are you talking about, liar.” And she slapped me in the face twice. **“**If you do not shut up I’ll ask the SS man to set the dog on you!” I felt ice cold. This was my initiation to Auschwitz. I went to get dressed, and that was it. My mother and my friends calmed me down.

There was a yellow star of David on the front and on the back of the coats, and a red triangle sewn on the front, meaning political prisoner.

Again, we lined up in rows of five. In front of me was quite an old woman, who had difficulty walking. I asked my mother to change places with her, and helped her.

We continued marching, between barbed wire, and approached the camp. The first ones had already entered the camp.

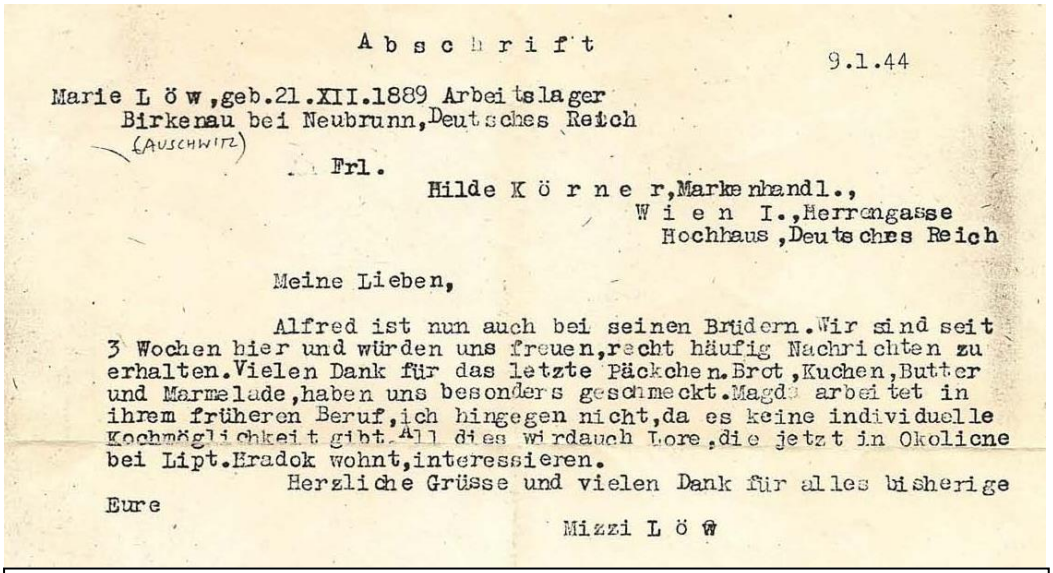
[8] From Slovakia had arrived transports of young people already at the end of 1942.

An SS man counted the rows. He counted five, five, five, and cut short after the five women containing my mother. All these people went into the camp. I shouted: “This is my mother, this is my mother”, but nobody even looked my way. Later I understood that they counted 500. Such a block could contain 500 people, so the SS man simply counted five hundred.

This is how I entered the camp called B II B.[9]

Later we understood that it was a family camp for people from Terezin, which was built by the September 1943 transport. This was the same transport I should have been on, but one day before leaving I received the cancellation order.

The morning after our arrival at Auschwitz we had to write postcards. Most of all they wanted us to write to ghetto Terezin. We were told that we could ask for parcels from relatives who lived outside the Terezin ghetto.



A b s c h r i f t

9.1.44

Marie L ö w, geb. 21.XII.1889 Arbeitslager
Birkenau bei Neubrunn, Deutsches Reich
(AUSCHWITZ)

Frl.
Hilde K ö r n e r, Markenhandl.,
W i e n I., Herrengasse
Hochhaus, Deutsches Reich

Meine Lieben,

Alfred ist nun auch bei seinen Brüdern. Wir sind seit 3 Wochen hier und würden uns freuen, recht häufig Nachrichten zu erhalten. Vielen Dank für das letzte Päckchen. Brot, Kuchen, Butter und Marmelade, haben uns besonders geschmeckt. Magda arbeitet in ihrem früheren Beruf, ich hingegen nicht, da es keine individuelle Kochmöglichkeit gibt. All dies wird auch Lore, die jetzt in Okolicne bei Lipt. Bradok wohnt, interessieren.
Herzliche Grüsse und vielen Dank für alles bisherige
Eure

Mizzi L ö w

To: Hilde Körner. My dear. Alfred is now with his brothers. We have been here for 3 weeks and we would be happy to receive a lot of information. Thank you for the last packet. Bread, cakes, butter and jam, we especially liked. Magda works in her former profession, but I do not, because there is no individual cooking option. Lore, who lives in the Okolicne at Lipt, is also interested in all this. Bradok lives, interested. Kindest regards and many thanks for everything. yours, Mizzi Löw

Figure 11: A letter from my mother, Marie(Mizzi) Löw, to Hilde Korner the girlfriend[10] of my uncle Alfred

[9] B = Birkenau, II = the second camp out of three. Camp II was divided into five small camps marked A-E.

[10] After the war my brother, Hans, went to Hilde Körner. She refused to return all the expensive impressionist pictures that Alfred owned, who gave her for keeping before he left to Terezin.

We entered a barrack which contained three storey bunks, one long bunk for five people. Blankets - maybe one thin blanket for each, I do not remember. In the middle of the block and along it was a chimney about 60 cm high, which went up at the end of the block. The chimney was not intended to heat the block, or something like it. It was used mainly to sit on or to be punished at.

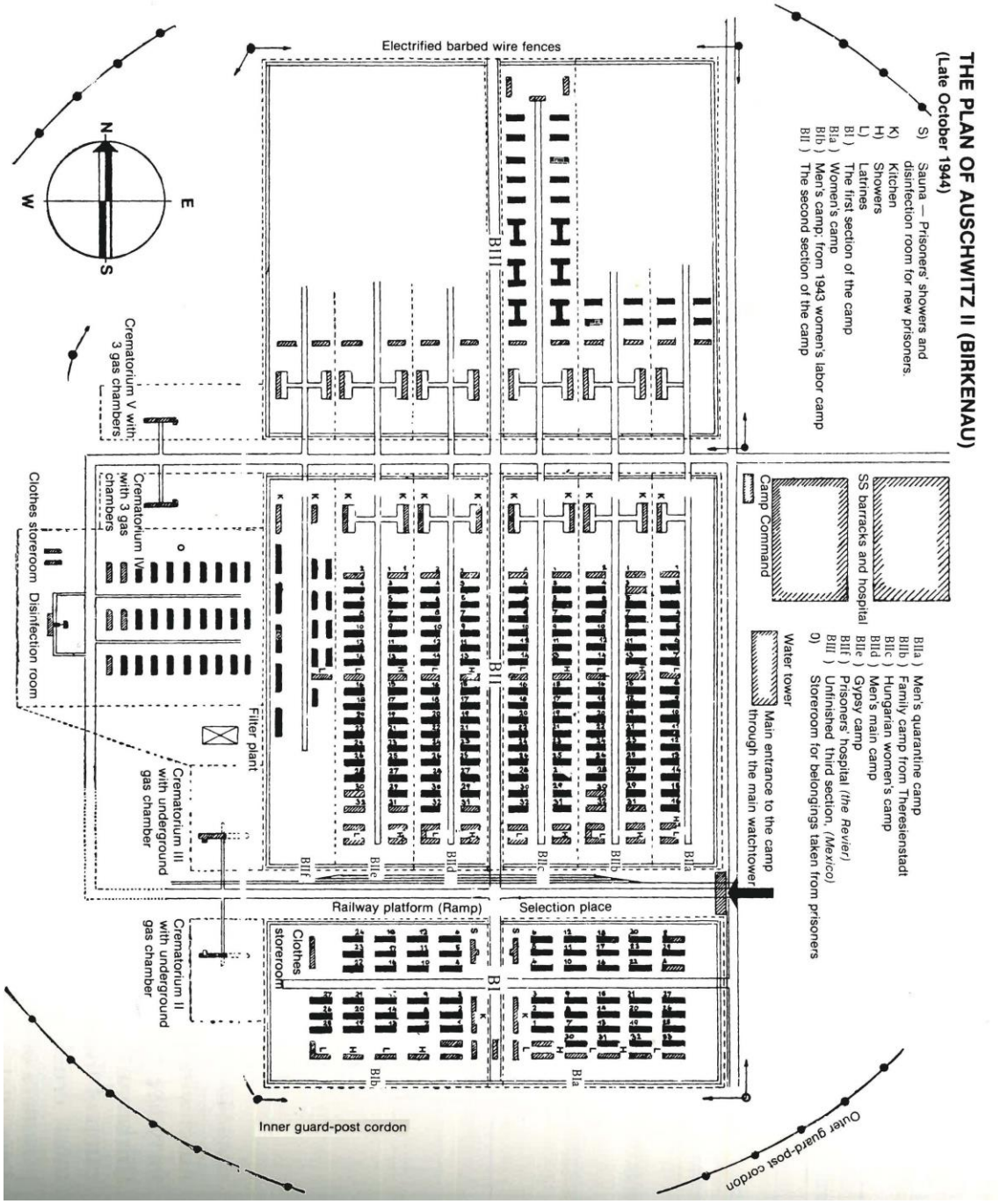


Figure 12: Plan of Auschwitz II (Birkenau), late October 1944.
Adapted from "The Death Factory", by Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka (1966).
(credit: Courtesy of Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.)

The hierarchy inside the block

In charge of the entire B II B camp was a German named Willy Brachmann. He was, in fact, a criminal prisoner (by his fault: While he had served as captain, he got drunk and several of the people on his ship drowned) – In whole, Willy Brachmann was a kindhearted man he did not lose his humanity and helped wherever he could, but dangerous when drunk.

Second in command were the capos (from among the prisoners). The camp-elderly determined the block's elderly woman who chose a deputy woman and other responsibilities for certain parts of the block.

All these people who were in charge lived in two small rooms attached to the block.

The people were from the September 1943 transport (the first one, to which belonged also my boyfriend, whom I missed so much). They had been there for three and a half months. They were desperate and looked totally indifferent. They pointed with their hands upward, as if they wanted to say: “In the end you, too, will reach the chimney”. Little by little we learned that in Birkenau people were killed by gas, and the bodies were afterwards cremated. My friend lost all interest in life and did not care about me any more. He seemed totally indifferent with a hungry look in his eyes.

In the camp there was a block with taps to wash. Most of the time the water in the taps was frozen. At the end of the camp were latrines, holes after holes in the floor. We relieved ourselves standing, without any partition. The barracks of the men were on one side and those of the women on the other.

Fredy Hirsch, who had arrived in September 1943, managed to obtain from the Germans that during the day the children were gathered in the last block (number 31) of the row, in order to activate them. Later, when another transport arrived, another children’s block (number 29) was added.

Fredy Hirsch, who knew me from Terezin, took me as a nursemaid for the children. I got a kindergarten children group and kept them busy.

I could see my mother, but we did not have much contact, as I did not live with her (because of the 500 count of people for each block). She remained spiritually strong up to the end. Most of the women did not work. Very few did forced labor or jobs to keep them busy, or worked in the factory to produce belts for guns.

Out of the 5,000 people of the September 1943 transport, 1,000 were no longer alive. The typhoid (from the clothes lice) killed hundreds of people. They also died from hunger, malnutrition, diarrhea and exhaustion.

The men were engaged in forced labor. I do not remember exactly what at. When people went to work in the morning, the Auschwitz orchestra played. The players were all pretty girls dressed in blue dresses with a white collar. During the selection time, when people were taken to the gas chambers, the girls were also forced to play.

On the one side of the camp there was a neighboring camp B II A, called “quarantine” = transition camp. People from all over Birkenau, who could no longer work, "Mussulmen", were transferred there and . . . taken to the gas chambers. We used to see the truck coming to take them. They were already exhausted and totally indifferent and did not object.

Food

In the morning - coffee. It was called coffee, but it was brown water. The important thing was that it was hot. I used the "coffee” to wash my face and brush my teeth.

At lunch - soup made of cattle beet, rotten potatoes, cartilage or meat fat, and grits.

In the evening - "coffee" and bread (about 3 slices). We always tried hard to keep one slice of bread for the morning. Several times the slice of bread I had kept was stolen. I fought with myself to keep the bread, so that I could eat it in the morning.

During the week - we sometimes also received a slice of sausage, a small piece of margarine, and some jam. The children were given also pink pudding, but the nursemaids were not allowed to take from the children. Fredy watched very carefully that the children do not give food to the nursemaids.

We had to clean the children and kill the lice. Once Fredy found dirt in the ear of a child from my group, and he shouted at me and gave me hell. We were afraid of him because he used to make sudden inspection calls.

Mazal Tov to Fredy on his Birthday

At night the children slept with their mothers. After some time, the children started to ask questions: "Why have we come here? What horrible place is this?"

In order to cheer up the children who loved Fredy very much, one of the nursemaids found a Czech folk song and we changed its words.

Word for Word Translation:

We little music players

Who play so well

Came from Terezin

To wish Fredy Mazel-Tov

Terezin was no longer paradise (Since Fredy left us)

And no one cared about us

Therefore, we took our stuff

And followed Fredy.

The Auschwitz extermination camp

It consisted of numerous camps. The camps were separated by electric barbed wire. There was a path in the middle. Every afternoon there was a roll call. (Between the blocks was a square where we stood). The roll call was of five people in a row.

The SS men came to count. The block elderly had to report how many people died and how many people are in the block.

Sometimes we stood for two hours and sometimes 24 hours, until the entire camp (the entire Auschwitz camp!) was counted. We had to wait until the number fit, because even if there was someone missing in another camp, or if the number was not accurate - we had to stand.

We stood in rain, snow or heat - in any kind of weather.

The advantage of the children's house was that the children and the nursemaids could stand inside the block.

In the Auschwitz camp, those who were craftsmen, or plumbers, for instance, could walk around freely. Thanks to these people, some of the prisoners managed to exchange things and get scissors, thread and needle, better shoes, more clothes to wear, etc.

Figure 13: The gate of the Auschwitz I camp in 1940

The September 1943 transport (5000 People arrived) … continued

In March 1944, when the September 1943 transport had been in Auschwitz already six months, Adolf Eichmann[11] arrived at the family camp. (The Germans wanted to present the family camp to the Red Cross).

The prisoners from the September 1943 transport were told that they were going to be transferred to the Heidebreck labor camp in Germany. They were given postcards and were told to write on them the date of March 23rd, 1944. The prisoners claimed: "But today is only March 6th?". The Germans told them all kinds of stories, such as “it was going to take a long time before the postcards arrive.”

We, from the December 1943 transport, started to envy them - they were leaving and we were staying.

(Fredy was on the September 1943 transport, which was supposed to leave for a labor camp, so he appointed his successor in the children’s home).

The next morning they were given a big ration of bread and clean clothes and they were told to make all the preparations for leaving.

On the morning of March 8th 1944 the commanders came to take them. They walked to Quarantine B II A (at that stage 3,800 people remained alive). They were told that from there they will be taken to the train station on lorries. The only people of this transport who remained in the camp were those who were sick. A few hours later, about forty people returned from there (from the Quarantine) - all of them were doctors and nurses and a few pairs of twins (The Mengele twins, for medical experiments.).

The doctors and nurses returned thanks to Dr. Mengele, who felt like their colleague.

In the afternoon, the rumor spread in the children’s house that Fredy was not feeling well. Rumors and information were passed by shouts from block to block. The blocks were fairly close to each other.

Around six o’clock in the evening, a curfew was declared – it was forbidden to leave the blocks. At that time, we were generally already in the block, not in the children’s house.

Everybody had to stay in the blocks. There was no roll call. We found this entire affair very strange.

At night we heard horrible screams from the quarantine and the noise of lorries.

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[11] **Adolf Eichmann** (from the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust): he was a German-Austrian Nazi SS-Obersturmbannführer ("Senior Assault Unit Leader") and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust. He was one of the most pivotal actors in the implementation of the “Final Solution”. Charged with managing and facilitating the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and killing centers in the German-occupied East.

(From the quarantine prisoners were generally taken to be gassed. Later on - they went to work from there).

In the morning, we saw flames coming out of the chimneys and crematoria. We understood that they were taken to be gassed. We heard it also from the craftsmen, who walked around in the camp.

What happened with Fredy? There were several versions:

One - that he had an ampule of luminal (a sedative). Fredy probably smelled a rat. He could not witness the death of the children he loved so much.

Another version - that the Germans made him commit suicide in order to prevent a revolt. He was the only person who could carry out any kind of upheaval, but he died before everybody else, and maybe only managed to shout something in the direction of the blocks before he died. This was probably the source of the rumor that Fredy was not feeling well.

The people from the Sonderkommando (those responsible for taking the bodies out of the gas chambers) said that the people who went to the gas chambers sang the Israeli hymn ("Hatikva") and the Czech hymn.

Why were these people killed?! Because they were of no more use. They seemed weak and it was not worth while to show them to the Red Cross delegation.

This event gave a horrible impression to us. Suddenly there was much more space in the camp. Spirits were very low. Now I managed to move in with my mother.

The craftsmen who walked around "freely" brought again information from the political office (where Jewish women worked who managed to look into documents). The information said that our transport cards from December 1943 were marked S.B. in German, meaning special treatment (Sonder Behandlung) by gas six months later.

We knew that we were going to share the fate of the people from the September 1943 transport (we had three months left). We started to think about rebelling in case they were going to take us. The instructors in the children’s house started to organize it. The plan was to smuggle petroleum into the camp, and set fire inside the bunks the moment they were coming to take us, and start escaping, and wish good luck to all those who would manage to escape.

The morale was suitable for the occasion, but one gets used to everything, and we even invented jokes.

We did not worry and did not think about what was going to happen in three months, but whether we were going to get bread in the evening, and soup, and what will happen the next day.

I am very sick

One day I developed high fever and had a terrible headache. We had with us a famous neurologist from Prague, and my mother asked him to examine me. I started to see double. The neurologist identified it as infectious encephalitis.

Dr. Klein, a German SS doctor, often came to our camp. He was a real sadist, but he loved children very much, and when he came to the children's house, he caressed them.

Dr. Klein was responsible for the sick block. This was an ordinary block, but instead of three storey bunks, there were only two storey ones and real mattresses.

Dr. Klein examined me and told me to lie on the chimney, in the middle of the block. I laid on my stomach so that he could extract liquid from my spine. He knew that this intervention would be very painful, and he told me that if I keep quiet (meaning if I do not scream) he will bring me a medicine. When he intervened it hurt terribly, but I forced myself not to scream (anesthesia was out of the question). Dr. Klein brought me the medicine (sulfa), as he had said. I stayed in bed there for ten days, but recovered despite everything. Other patients who screamed did not receive medicine and died.

Figure 14: Magda as a young girl (19 years old, December 1940)

Lederer's escape

In one of the men's blocks**,** the elderly block was a man called Lederer (around 45). He has been for many years an officer in the Czech army.

One of the SS men (Viktor Pestek of Romanian origin), a war invalid, was brought to guard the Jews. He fell in love with one of our girls (Renée Neumann), and he knew that we are due to be cremated. More than anything he wanted to save his beloved. This invalid was friendly with Lederer.

One day, during a roll call, a siren sounded all over Auschwitz - a signal that someone was missing. It became known that Lederer managed to escape with the Rumanian SS man, in an SS uniform. Lederer managed to reach Czechoslovakia, and even Terezin, in order to tell people the truth about the transports. He told it to Rabbi Leo Beck, a member of the Judenrat. The rabbi preferred not to spread in the ghetto the news Lederer had brought. Until today, opinions differ as to the honorable rabbi's decision. In the meantime, in Prague, they organized a hiding place for Lederer, the SS man and his girlfriend, when the SS would manage to take her out of Birkenau.

The SS man, who escaped together with Lederer planned to return to Auschwitz and save the Jewish girl, he also had a Polish friend in the city of Auschwitz, and she informed the Gestapo. He was executed by shooting, after being caught by the Gestapo upon arrival at the train station of the city of Auschwitz.

Another month passed, and, in the meantime, a new transport arrived from Terezin (May 1944). With this transport arrived also Karolina, who is the mother of my husband **Meir Katzenstein[12].** This was a transport of 10,000 people. The camp was full again and hunger bothered more and more. Many people became ill.

At the other side of the camp was the men's camp B II C - mostly Poles, political prisoners. They had been in Auschwitz for a long time, and used to throw bread to the Jewish girls. Their dresses were striped (in Birkenau we did not usually wear striped clothes), and they could walk around freely between the camps.

I heard about the prisoners throwing bread, and I wanted to bring some bread to my mother who was very hungry.

One day I went to the fence. It was very dangerous to hang around there because of the guards. One Pole went into his block. He brought something. I looked the other way, and he threw me a

[12] Meir Katzenstein, my dear husband (1915–1995), was born in Germany. He immigrated to Israel in 1936. His parents remained in Germany and were sent to Terezin. His father, Leopold Katzenstein, died in the ghetto Terezin on July 23rd 1943. His mother, Karolina Katzenstein nee Hirsch, was exterminated by gas in Auschwitz on May 16th 1944. His sister, Flora, and her husband escaped to America.

small package of bread. At the same moment I felt someone holding me by the neck. An SS man grabbed me and asked me in which block I was.

He took me there and ordered the block elderly woman to lay me on the chimney and give me 25 hidings with a stick and shave my hair off. (Contrary to other women prisoners, in the family camp the women's hair was not cut off.) I was also forbidden to work in the children's house, and was sent to work in a factory for straps for guns. Two weeks later I returned to the children's house.

Little by little the six months we had known about passed by (they were supposed to end on June 15th 1944). The petroleum was already in the camp, but on the 15th of June nothing happened.

At that time the Germans badly needed manpower. The Allied Forces had already invaded Belgium and France, and the east front had collapsed. With the Germans, anybody who was able to hold a gun was sent to the front, and they were desperately in need of a labor force.

We knew nothing. Only later, when we were sent to Hamburg, in Germany, we heard about the war situation. Thus, another two weeks passed and nothing happened. Spirits went up.

Departure from Auschwitz

At the beginning of July 1944 people of Dr. Mengele came to the camp and declared there was going to be a selection. Men and women between 15 and 40 had to report to Dr. Mengele. My mother was not included in the selection, as she was 55. We had to undress and stand naked in front of him, so that he could check our state of health. He would signal right or left, meaning, who was going to work and who was not.

Dr. Mengele took 2,000 healthy people, including me, 1,000 men and 1,000 women, and gave an order to transfer them to special blocks.

Women who were mothers of children, could be included in the selection, on condition that they leave their children. I witnessed heart breaking scenes, when men from the men's block implored the women to join the selection. Only four women came. There were around 2,000 mothers there. The mothers did not want to leave their children.

I asked my mother whether she wanted me to stay with her, and she answered me: "No, you must get out of here and tell your brothers and sisters what we went through". We both knew what would become of my mother, but we did not talk about it.

Again, the craftsmen wandered around and told the instructors that this time we were really taken to work and not to be gassed (this information came from the political department).

It was decided that we would not try and rebel with the petroleum. From the camp we could see a train.

Next morning, we saw the men walk to the train and get on. We ran wild with joy, knowing that we, women, too, were going on the train and out of here. We lived in hope that the information was correct.

Next morning, the women received an order to move, but we were first taken to the women's camp B-I in Birkenau. There we saw that however bad we thought our conditions were, they were good compared to the women's camp in Birkenau. All the women there had their hair shaven off, and they were often beaten up. There were many Polish women there, who were very rude. From them I heard for the first time the curse word "cholera".

We stayed there for two days, received new clothes - a long linen dress, an overall for work and open wooden clogs with cloth on top. Two days later we went to the train station, where an ordinary train was waiting.

A young woman who had secretly given birth to a baby girl (the baby was two months old), also joined the selection. When we left for the women's camp, she managed to get hold of some sort of sack and she put the baby inside. She must have sedated her. She passed the women's camp all right. Up to the train the baby was quiet. When we started boarding the train, the baby started crying. When we went up the steps, I was already inside, the woman and the baby were behind me. When the SS guard heard the baby's crying, he approached the woman, opened her

parcel (everyone had a parcel), and discovered the baby. He took it out and threw it far away on the platform. The baby died instantly. The mother wanted to run and take her, but the women who stood behind her pushed her up into the train.

The train left the platform and set off, and thus we left Auschwitz for an unknown destination. All in all we were 1,000 women there.

The trip from Auschwitz took a whole day, maybe, and our spirits were high. On the way we saw cities devastated by bombs. During the trip we were divided into two groups - and five wagons went in another direction. We remained 500 women. From the names of the stations, we gathered that we were already in Germany.

The first thing we did was to improvise bras. We cut off pieces from the bottom of our dresses (some girls had gotten hold of scissors or thread and needle in Auschwitz). We tied it around our bosoms, as we had no bras. Fortunately, our dresses were long enough, and there was sufficient material. In the meantime my hair grew, and I even had beautiful curls.

The family camp in Birkenau, which I left at the beginning of July 1944, was entirely liquidated a few days after we had left toward Germany. They were all exterminated by gas, elderly, sick, young mothers and their children.

Among the victims was my late mother, Marie (Mizzi) Löw, age 55. The mother of my husband, Meir, Karolina Katzenstein, age 56, who arrived in Birkenau in May 1944. I heard about all this after the war from prisoners who had remained in Auschwitz until the liberation by the Red Army in January 1945, and returned to Czechoslovakia.

Hamburg

Finally we arrived in Hamburg. We found a ghost city. Seventy five percent of the houses were destroyed. The SS men handed us over to the Wehrmacht (the German army). Those were elderly soldiers who were no longer fit for the front. They led us on foot through half the town, until we reached the port. On our way we saw mass destruction by bombs. In fact, we were happy about the bombs.

They brought us to a camp, which was called Dessauer Ufer, in very big building. It was a warehouse area. The building stood on pillars above the river Elbe (flowing into the sea). We entered the building (our guards were about 45 - 55 and treated us well). It was a very big hall, and in it - beds with sheets. Every one got a bed, no longer wooden bunks. There were big washrooms, lavatories with running water, a real "five star hotel".

First thing, we lay (threw ourselves) on the beds. But the "celebration" did not last long. As soon as we lay down, the sirens started howling - an air raid, reflectors with all kinds of colors (of the anti-aircraft canons).

One of the guards came in and told us word for word: "Girls, when you hear the sirens, first thing you must do is relieve yourselves" (because of the blast). We all ran to the lavatories. Then the guards came and took us down to the cellar of the building. From the cellar the only way to escape was into the river.

We spent the night there. I do not remember if there was a floor there or only ground, but I remember that we dreamt about beds and sheets.

This happened every night. We hardly managed to sleep. We were afraid. There was order in the bombing: English planes at night and American planes bombing during the day.

In the morning we received something to drink, I do not remember what, and we were taken to work. We walked up to another port (we had already seen the sea) and put on a wooden floor ferry. We lay down immediately on the floor and fell asleep because we were really tired. The trip took about an hour and a half.

We might have been divided into several groups. Not all the girls went on the ferry. I have some difficulty in remembering. We did all kinds of work. We had to enter a kind of pool with black material such as tar. I do not remember anything else. We worked there for a couple of days.

After that we worked at something harder, loading big stones on wagons and pushing the wagons. We worked in the port for two months.

After that we were told to look for pieces of bombs and collect them. This was dangerous work.

While on the train from Auschwitz to Hamburg, I became friendly with two girls whom I did not know before: Walda and Vera. We used to encourage each other all the time. We lived and worked together. When we returned from work, we managed to wash up a little, lie down on the beds for an hour, and back into the cellar. This repeated itself each night for two months.

The food was much better. At work we received nourishing and tasty soup, and in the evening - bread, a piece of margarine, some jam and coffee.

We got there in summer (in July), and for two months, at the port, so we did not suffer from cold, although it was raining all the time in Hamburg.

When we arrived in Hamburg, the Germans selected one girl from among us to be in charge. This girl stayed in the building and did not go to work. Sometimes girls were sick and did not go to work, so she watched over them. In the neighboring building were Italian captives, and the cellar was a common space. That girl became very friendly with an Italian, and also became pregnant from him. In the sixth month, when her pregnancy became apparent - she was sent to the Bergen-Belsen camp, where she died.

All Hamburg was full of prisoners and war captives. They were all mobilized for the war effort in forced labor - French, Italians, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Czechs, etc.

The French used to receive parcels from home, and sometimes they threw us something - even chocolate.

After two days our guards were exchanged with SS women. They were really disgusting, sadists. They treated us awfully - hit us, swore, and some were even lesbians. When we wanted to make them angry, we spoke Czech.

During the day, in the middle of the air raids, we sometimes entered the shelters above the ground. The Germans entered first, and if there was room left, we, too, would enter. But we usually worked at places where there were no shelters. It was the SS women who insisted that we go into the shelters, because they were afraid to stay with us outside.

At the end of September 1944, we were transferred to another forced labor camp called Neugraben. There they built a new neighborhood for Germans who had lost their houses in the air raids. We had to build everything, even an infrastructure for water, etc. There were a few barracks in the camp for living.

The beds were in two stories. In each room lived twelve girls. The lavatory and the washroom were outside.

At night it was forbidden to go to the lavatory. If one of the girls had to go, we used to go and pee outside the block. If we were caught, we were beaten up.

Winter approached. The weather became cold. We didn’t have socks, the cloth of our clogs was already torn. Later it started to snow and we really suffered from the cold. Sometimes the French saved us when they threw us a pair of socks or something like that.

I worked in digging canals for the water pipes. I had to dig deep canals with my hands and with tools. I also worked at straightening the ground surface. I became a real expert in land leveling.

We always worked together - the three girlfriends. We were hungry all the time, and during work we talked only about what we would eat when liberated, a kind of imaginary cooking course.

After we left the port, Italian prisoners came there, and two days after their arrival - a bomb fell on the building and they were all killed. How lucky we were.

In the other camp we slept better, because it was far from the city. We did not run to the shelters, etc.

We used to work near a working class neighborhood. The people living in that neighborhood saw us walking every day. They also saw how we were searching for food in dustbins: Fruit and vegetable or potato peels, and collecting them in order to cook them later on a camp fire. Once we heard someone call us: **"**Psss ...". We came closer and saw on a window sill a parcel wrapped in white paper. Inside were fresh potato pancakes. This became a real feast. We were not afraid of the guards. At the most, we got a few hidings. We could already smell the end of the war.

Next morning, we approached this house again, hoping to find something. The lady opened the door and set the dog on us to scare us. The neighbors must have spotted what she had done and threatened her.

Our guards told the people who saw us dragging to work every day from our neighborhood that we were whores.

The weather was already very cold, the cloth of the shoes dragged behind, and the feet were not protected. Long afterwards I still suffered from frostbite.

On Sundays we did not work. One Sunday (in October 1944), we were taken on a long trip. We came into town, to a huge shelter, intended for thousands of people. We learned that it was a new shelter, which had to be tried out. All the prisoners in Hamburg were gathered to experiment to find out how many hours they could stay inside without opening the windows. We stayed there for a great many hours, until people started to faint. But only after many people fainted, we were allowed to come out.

We remained for the entire winter in that camp, about five and a half months. There were air raids all the time.

Karl-Heinz Schultz, a German teacher and social worker, used to live in that neighborhood. He was then ten years old, and when he grew older, he began investigating about us, and came to Israel. He put an ad in the newspaper, that he was looking for women who had worked in the place where he lived. Some of us saw the ad and thus we met him. He contacted everyone of us who survived. He erected a memorial board in Neugraben and organized several exhibitions. He calls us "the girls". We exchange letters, and once every two years, at least, he comes to Israel with his family.

https://www.gedenkstaetten-in-hamburg.de/gedenkstaetten/gedenkort/gedenkorte-zur-erinnerung-an-das-aussenlager-neugraben/

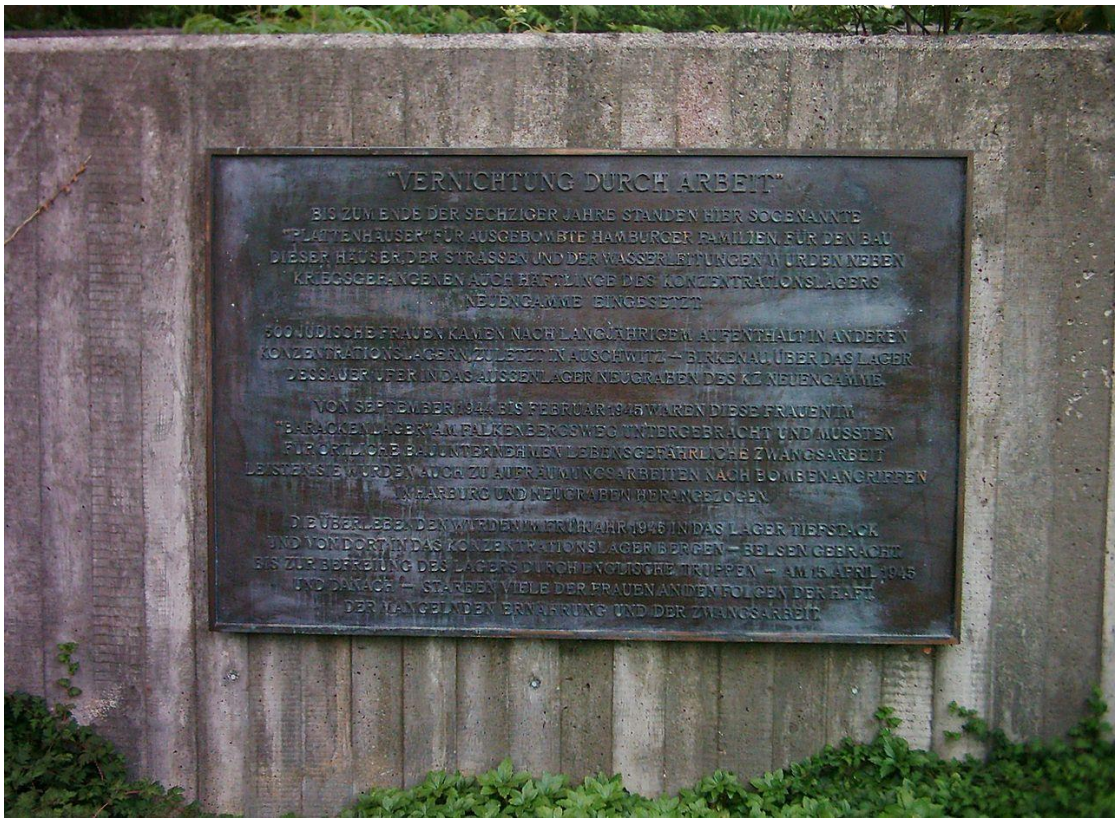
Further information on the Neugraben satellite camp of the Neuengamme concentration camp can also be found on the website of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial https://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/

Some history from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neugraben-Fischbek :

In Neugraben was a subcamp of the Nazi concentration camp Neuengamme. The camp is listed as No. 560 Hamburg-Neugraben in the official German list of concentration camps.

On September 13th, 1944 the women subcamp was opened in Falkenbergweg. 500 Czech-Jewish women coming from the Ghetto Theresienstadt were deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp. The SS in Auschwitz selected the women for labour in Hamburg. In the Neugraben camp the work was building auxiliary homes, also laying supply pipes and building streets in the neighbourhood Falkenbergsiedlung.

During the last months of World War II, some of the women had to do clearing up work in Harburg's oil industry and to dig antitank obstacles in Hamburg-Hausbruch. In February 1945, the SS transferred the women to the camp Hamburg-Tiefstack and later from there to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.



Memorial sign "Extermination through labour"
at the quarter office in Neugraben-Fischbek

On 8th February 1945 we were transferred to another camp called Tiefstack. I do not remember where we lived. I only remember huge pots, out of which we were given soup, when we returned to the camp after a day's work. We were in this camp for a short period, maybe six weeks. Again, we did all kinds of work, which I do not remember.

In our town, Mistek in the Czech republic, I had a friend called Erika. She was sent with her family to ghetto Lodz. Ghetto Lodz was liquidated at the time we left Auschwitz, and the survivors were sent to Auschwitz. Erika and her mother were added to those who were sent to Hamburg. Thus, they came with us to Tiefstack. Erika came down with tonsillitis in the camp, and a Jewish woman doctor who worked in the camp, wrote her a sick note for three days, allowing her not to go to work. On the third day, Erika's mother begged that she should stay one more day at least in the camp.

In the camp remained only the cooks, cleaning women and the sick. That day, while we were at work, we heard very heavy bombing. When we returned to the camp in the evening, we saw the camp was destroyed, and all the people in it had been killed. Erika, too, whose mother begged she should stay in one more day. But, like in stories, the pots of soup were not hit. The first thing we did, despite the casualties, was to jump on the food.

Later at night I heard Erika's mother walk around and cry. She was blaming herself for her daughter's death. One or two days later, we were transferred to Bergen-Belsen. I never saw her again. She must have died there.

In the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

Around the 6th of April 1945 we left Hamburg. I remember that we travelled in open cattle wagons. The distance to Bergen-Belsen was very short, but we travelled for two days, to and fro, forward and back. On the way we saw many prisoners in trains (mainly men). We saw also many corpses falling off the train.

When we had to pee, the SS men accompanied us. At one stop in order to pee, Walda (my friend) went off the train. They let her go. She relieved herself and came back (but did not yet go on the train). Suddenly the train started moving (the guard was not that close anymore), and Walda remained behind. She could, in fact, have escaped, but where would she go in an unknown environment with war all around her? She raised her arms and ran. Vera and I managed with all our forces, to get her into the train. (Three women escaped in fact.)

We arrived at Bergen-Belsen[13]. I do not remember what the camp looked like. All I remember is that we were brought into a barrack (we were around 480 women). The barrack consisted of an empty space of around 4 x 8 meters. We were very tired, so we started to get ready to sleep. We sat, every one with legs apart between the other one's legs. This was the only way we could all sleep. That is how we spent the night.

The guard was kept by the SS men. Next morning, we could walk around freely. There was nothing to eat or drink, and nobody told us what to do. The entire camp was full of corpses. Wherever we stepped, there were corpses. It was awful! If you already bumped into a living person, he/she was full of lice, all the clothes were full of lice (these lice brought about the typhus epidemic).

We found out that there was no food at all. And as for water, there were two taps which were opened for two hours a day!

At that time there were 60,000 male and female prisoners in the camp, and there was, of course, heavy fighting over these taps. We saw people go and drink from the water holes. These people most probably died from polluted water.

The guards outside the camp were Hungarians.

Our girls discovered that outside the camp there was a field where they grew beets for cattle. There was only a barbed wire (non-electric) separation. When we were lucky and the guards did not shoot at us, we managed to bring beets into the camp. But in the camp awaited us another misfortune: The gypsy thieves only wanted others to do the job for them, because they themselves were afraid. Even when lucky, the gypsies assaulted us and robbed us of the beets.

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[13] The Bergen-Belsen camp served at the beginning of the war as a detention camp.
Only toward the end of the war it turned into a big concentration camp, where, according to records 60,000 Jews died from diseases and hunger. It was a sort of death by administration.

Two days after we arrived, we suddenly saw the SS men putting white stripes on their sleeve. They probably realized they would have to surrender. Our spirits soared. The following day they took the white stripes off, and our spirits sank again.

Most of the time we sat in the barrack doing nothing but listen to the noise of cannons and shells from afar. Around the fourth or fifth day after our arrival at the camp, an SS man came into our room and chose a few girls. He said it was for an interesting work. He took me, too (I was rather glad, because I was tired of sitting all day long without anything to do). Vera and Wald, too, got up to work. The work was as follows: We were given ropes and we had to tie the hands or feet of the corpses and drag them into piles. In short, to put them together. We had to throw the corpses onto piles. This was my work the whole day long.

The following day the guards came again with white stripes, and we heard the heavy sound of canons. We felt there was some disorder among the SS men. In fact, those who kept the order to some extent were the Hungarian guards, who were very cruel. Whenever they had the chance, they shot at the girls. This way seven days passed without food and almost without drinking.

Wherever we went, there were corpses. People simply dropped dead on the ground. You saw someone walk, then suddenly collapse in front of you.

The SS men continued to put the white stripes on and take them off alternately.

Figure 15: Piles of thin bodies of prisoners in one of the Bergen-Belsen common graves, as found by the British soldiers when they freed the camp in April 1945. (Photo 1498_20 credit: Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem and the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.)

Figure 16: Former SS women guards lowering the bodies of dead inmates into a common grave in Bergen-Belsen, after the camp liberation in April 1945. (Photo 4613_208 credit: Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem and the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.)

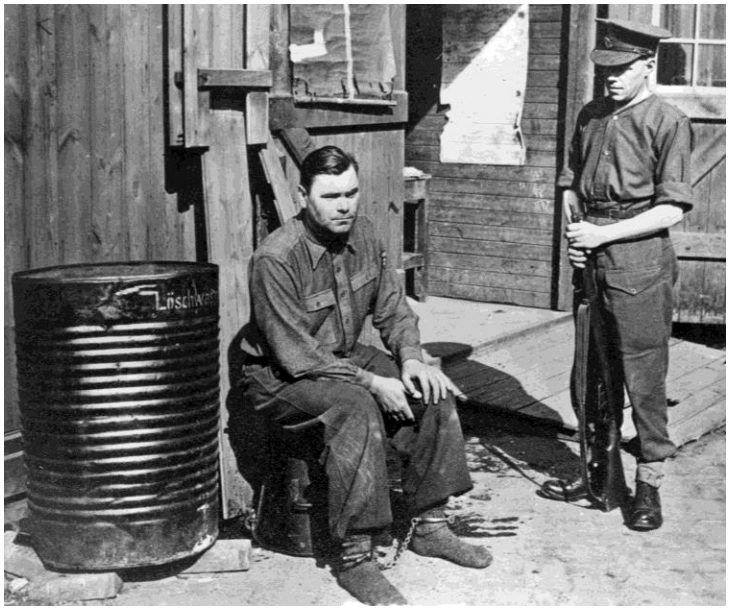

Figure 17: Josef Kramer (seated), the commandant of Bergen-Belsen from December 2, 1944, was apprehended by the British army when it liberated the camp on April 15, 1945.
(Photo 179_13 credit: Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem and the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.)

The liberation

On the 15th of April 1945 shooting became heavier. The guards appeared again with white stripes and did not take them off any more. That morning an SS man came into our room and said: "I need three girls to transfer things to our headquarters". I volunteered together with two other girls. He took us to some warehouse, from which we took a table and a few chairs and started walking in the direction of the headquarters. As we approached, we saw a white flag on top of the headquarters building, and everybody in the SS lodging was wearing white stripes.

The SS man told us to put the tables in front of the fence and go back.

All of a sudden, we saw a jeep emerging from the direction of the headquarters, and soldiers jumping off it. We saw that they were not German soldiers and were all shaken with excitement. I looked again and saw that the soldiers were wearing different uniforms. After the surprise of the first jeep, another jeep with soldiers appeared, and another one, and a lorry. We also saw all the SS men with the camp commander and the high ranking officers coming out of their lodging and standing. We stood there fascinated by the scene we were witnessing. We were sure that they have come to set us free.

I ran as fast as I could to the girls' barrack and shouted: "They freed us, they freed us". And then I collapsed!

All this happened around noon. I sat down exhausted.

Then I remember, that in the evening the prisoners must have broke into the SS warehouses. They took out potatoes and made camp fires in order to eat them baked.

The British soldiers wanted to do something good for the prisoners (which later on turned out to be a terrible mistake), and distributed everyone tins of corned beef and sweetened sterilized milk. This was disastrous, because many died after eating this on a stomach which had been empty for so long.

All in all, I was in Bergen-Belsen for eight days. All that time we ate nothing. The next day I felt very ill, and so did my friends. We wanted some tranquility, because there was terrible disorder before the arrival of the Red Cross.

We found a dark warehouse, where it was quiet. We lay down, regardless what on. I felt my temperature rising and a chill. It seemed as though I slept there for several days. Every now and then I woke up from high temperature and chill. Finally, when I woke up completely conscious, I saw on what we had been lying - shoe paste boxes. We also saw that many other people shared our feelings and came to the warehouse to look for peace and quiet, but by then they were all dead. We were the only ones still breathing. Then we saw that our entire body was covered with red spots, a lot of red spots. We realized that we got typhus fever, the very disease that killed thousands of people here in Bergen-Belsen.

In the meantime, the International Red Cross had already arrived on the spot. I do not know how, but we found a building that served as a hospital. I lay there for a few days.

In the hospital there was a woman, called Mrs. Impey, a member of the Quäkers organization (an international voluntary organization for help and rescue). She met me in the hospital and loved me very much. She sent me to very clean lodgings and asked a Swiss Red Cross doctor to examine me, because I was very weak.

The doctor came at 7:00 pm in the evening. He examined me and asked me to tell him a little about what I had gone through. I spoke French with him. He sat with me and I spoke and spoke and spoke, until 7:00 am in the morning. He simply sat and listened. A few days later I felt better.

I heard, I do not remember how, that they were looking for girls to serve in the Red Cross dining room. I volunteered and was accepted immediately. I was given lodgings in a house that became theirs and started to work as a waitress.

Mrs. Impey watched over me all the time.

People from all kinds of organizations came and asked us where we wanted to go to. I always said - to England, because I knew my brothers were there.

There was a card index of all the prisoners, and I registered there.

During the two months I stayed in Bergen-Belsen, the British brought German groups from the city of Bergen-Belsen to see the corpses, the horrible collection of corpses. The reactions were: “I did not see. I did not hear…”.

Meeting my brother Hans

I lived together with many girls from many countries. While I was laundering in my room, I suddenly heard the girls shouting: "Magda, Magda, someone is looking for you". I went outside and saw a man, an officer in a British uniform. My brother, Hans, came to look for me.

When I was liberated, I weighed 39 kg. For the sake of comparison - in Auschwitz I still weighed 70 kg.

How did I know how much I weighed in Auschwitz? It was after I was caught trying to find food at the political prisoners, and I was sent to work in a factory for a fortnight. There were scales there, so I checked.

Figure 18: Magda with her brother Hans Löw, who had spent the war in the British army, as an officer, in June 1945. When he found her in Bergen-Belsen, she weighed 39 kg.

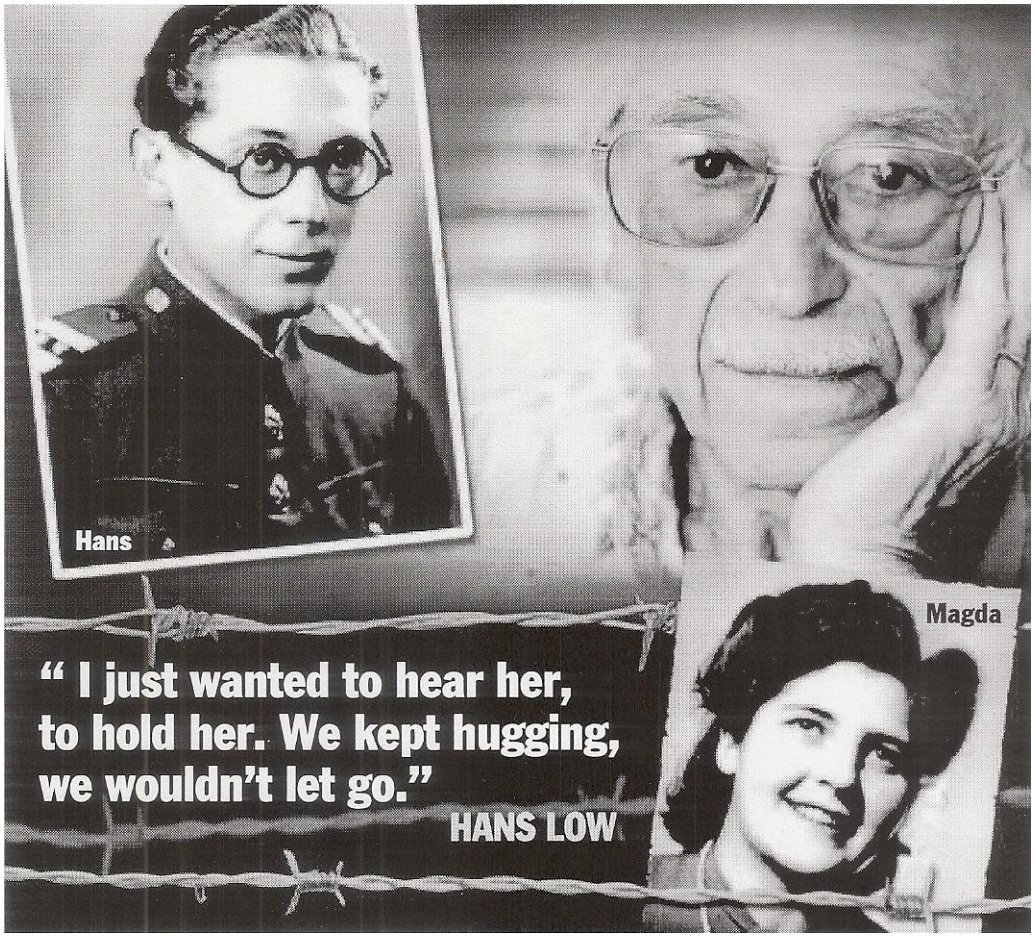

Figure 19: Melbourne Australia, Herald Sun, Saturday, January 22, 2005, page 24, *www.heraldsun.com.au*

After victory, Free Czech Army officer Hans Low, whose mother was gassed in Auschwitz, hitchhiked across Germany to find if his sister was still alive in the Bergen-Belsen labour camp.

"For Jews, the return to Czechoslovakia was like coming home to a graveyard," he recalls. Tears flow from his eyes as he recalls his tightest embrace, the day he held his little sister's wasted figure for dear life.

Lt Low went AWOL after the Nazi surrender in May 1945 to find Magda among the displaced millions made homeless in Europe. The last time he had seen her was 1937 when she was a teen and he left to work in England. But Magda's exit visa from Czechoslovakia was blocked.

Their father, Heinrich Low, 70. Was helping smuggle Jewish refugees, before the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, but never went himself.

Mr Low and his brothers died from pneumonia after Czech Jews were sent to tile ghetto city of Terezin, having been stripped of his family's liqueur factory, home and all property.

Figure 20: The Hitler Youth took over their villa

When the debonair Hans' artillery unit came home as heroes in 1945, excitement was tempered with dread.

"After our victory parade in Prague I saw two girls I knew," he says. "They told me there was no hope for my parents but my sister had been sent to Germany."

Hans' commander refused him leave to look for her, but he went anyway. After commandeering a bus of singing German POWs at gunpoint, then getting a ride north with British troops, he reached Bergen.

"I knew thousands died of typhus at the camp after liberation. "I found the commanding officer, a Czech," says Hans, a widower and grandfather living in Cheltenham Melbourne Australia. "He said, 'I'll let you take your sister if she is alive, but I need you to transport 300 exinmates back to Prague'."

He passed the front gate, near where diseased corpses had been bulldozed into mass graves by British liberators. "My sister was helping the Red Cross. I saw her in the canteen," he says. "Very beautiful, very, very thin." She survived typhus but dozens of inmates died around her. Hans weeps as he recalls her wasted 39kg frame.

"I just wanted to hear her, to hold her. We kept hugging, we couldn't let go. "was terribly emotional … then we spent many hours talking. She told me about my parents. "She said she had volunteered to accompany my mother when she was transported to Auschwitz in 1943."

Auschwitz was a surreal world of 115,000 souls. There was one slave labour camp, then Birkenau with four gas chambers and crematorium and finally the Buna Morowitz factory camp. In the Birkenau sub-camp (Auschwitz II) watery turnip soup with bread was the staple food, filthy prison stripes were changed every two months and lice-ridden inmates shared bunks.

Jews were forced to work at gas chambers and ovens, where up to 10,000 were murdered in a day. Every four months, the workers were gassed, too. Most of the women and children were killed on arrival, but a minority, usually young men, were kept as slaves.

The biggest killers were typhoid, malnutrition, diarrhea, exhaustion and brutal guards.

The camp band played jolly German marching tunes every morning when the men went out to labour. The band had to play again at sadistically grueling roll calls and during SS selections for gassing.

In July 1944, Magda survived a selection by staff of "angel of death" Dr Josef Mengele, then saw 2,000 women give up a chance to live by staying with doomed children. "My sister wanted to stay in Auschwitz with my mother," says Hans. "Mother told her she must go to stay alive, to tell us what had happened."

Days after Magda was transferred from Auschwitz in July 1944, Marie (Mizzi) Löw, mother of Magda and Hans, died in the liquidation by gas of the Birkenau family camp.

Magda was saved for a slave labour camp near Hamburg, but it was flattened by bombing, so they were marched to Bergen-Belsen. Panicked Nazis crowded 60,000 Jews into the labour camp, which was designed for 10,000.

Magda helped dispense Red Cross food in the liberated camp but 25,000 more died from typhus and weakness. Hans' sister was too weak to climb into the convoy of 20 trucks, so he arranged a car for her and set off in charge of five British soldiers and 300 freed inmates.

"They were quite young boys, from the east, now part of the Ukraine - they were completely dehumanized," he says. "Like animals, poor boys. "There were fruit trees along the road. They didn't pick the cherries off, they tore off whole branches. "I arranged a barn with straw for them to sleep on, but they refused to go in far because they feared we would lock them in and set the place on fire. "I had to draw my pistol to get them in to sleep." When a kitchen truck came he had to fire into the air to get order.

"My sister just asked for boiled potatoes, but everything she tried to eat or drink she vomited up again, her stomach was so fragile."

Sixty years later, Magda lives in Israel. In 1948, Hans and his British wife, Ann, found their own promised land in Australia. He spent three years trying in vain to recover his family's factory and home. But the communists nationalized them after "liberating" them from Nazis.

Hans Low does not hate. "The Japanese are in a denial, but the German people have faced what they had done, taught their young, paid compensation," he says. "You have to forgive - but I cannot forget." Hans Low

Hans planned to take me back to the Czech Republic[14]. Mrs. Impey gave me her suitcase. I did not have much to put in it.

Saying goodbye to her was very hard. She was a warm-hearted English woman. For many years to come I still corresponded with her.

We went back to Czech Republic in a British military car. At night we stopped in some German village, and my brother asked to give us food and a place to stay. I received the farmer's bedroom. Another thing I remember - wherever there was food, I always asked for potatoes.

We reached Prague and from there I continued with Hans to the village, which was a military camp, one big set of barracks. I stayed with him in a rented room for about two months. Then I went to my sister Lore, in Slovakia. I did nothing except eat.

Then I went back to Prague. My brother, Hans, went back to our town Mistek. For two years he tried to get my parents' property back. When my brother, Hans, finally managed to get our property back, he had to leave, escape from the communist revolution (1948). He was considered a property owning capitalist. He packed what he could and escaped to Britain with his English wife Ann.

In Prague I moved from one apartment to another. I also worked as a clerk in a government office (my knowledge of several languages helped me a great deal). I was sick a lot, but, fortunately, not with tuberculosis, as was the case with many other survivors.

The Jewish community already mobilized to help the survivors of the camps. One day I read in one of the community newspapers, that in Geneva a course for "nursemaids for war victim children" was going to be opened.

In November 1947 I went to a course in Geneva.

The course was in French. There were students from all over the world, and from all religions. In order to specialize, I was sent to an institution which dealt with German children whose fathers were detained in Russia (the former Soviet Union). I was reticent at first, but very quickly I realized that what had happened was not the little ones' fault. I treated them with devotion and love. They, too, were victims of this damned war.

I received a certificate of appreciation with special mention from the headmistress of the institute, and I graduated with excellence.

During the course I became ill, and I had a pleasant experience (the world is small). They called for a doctor. And who was he? Both I and he were very surprised, as it turned out to be the same doctor who had listened to my life story for twelve hours in the Bergen-Belsen camp.

[14] Czechoslovakia at that time.

After the course I worked in a home for Jewish children in Adelboden, in Switzerland. Then in March 1949 I immigrated to the Land of Israel.

**Figure 21: Magda with German war orphans in Geneva (1948),
where she volunteered for training as a nurse for children victims of the World War II**

Epilogue

Today, November 16, 1994, I am exactly 73.

Pensioner of the General Sick Fund. Mother of one daughter and three sons and grandmother of 14 grandchildren, all living in Israel.

My dear children and grandchildren!
When you read these memories, please remember, that the true heroism during the holocaust was not only to come up against the Germans, like the Warsaw ghetto uprising, but mainly to remain human in those inhuman conditions, in short, to go on living as a human being.

Magda Katzenstein

Update, April 30, 2006: Today I am a widow of 84.
I have 17 grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and two more on the way.

Editor's Note (December 23, 2019)

Magda died on April 30, 2008, on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, at the age of 86, and was buried on Holocaust Remembrance Day in the Segula cemetery in Petach-Tikva ISRAEL. So symbolic, a woman who lived the memory of Holocaust, every day in her life, left us on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Every year on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Magda used to light a candle at a ceremony held at the Yoseftal Community Center in Petach-Tikva. This time because she was hospitalized, the son Amiram was sent to light a candle instead. Just as he was lighting the candle, she parted from us and passed away when her son, Arieh, was next to her at the hospital.

Updating of current grandchildren's stock: 17 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren.

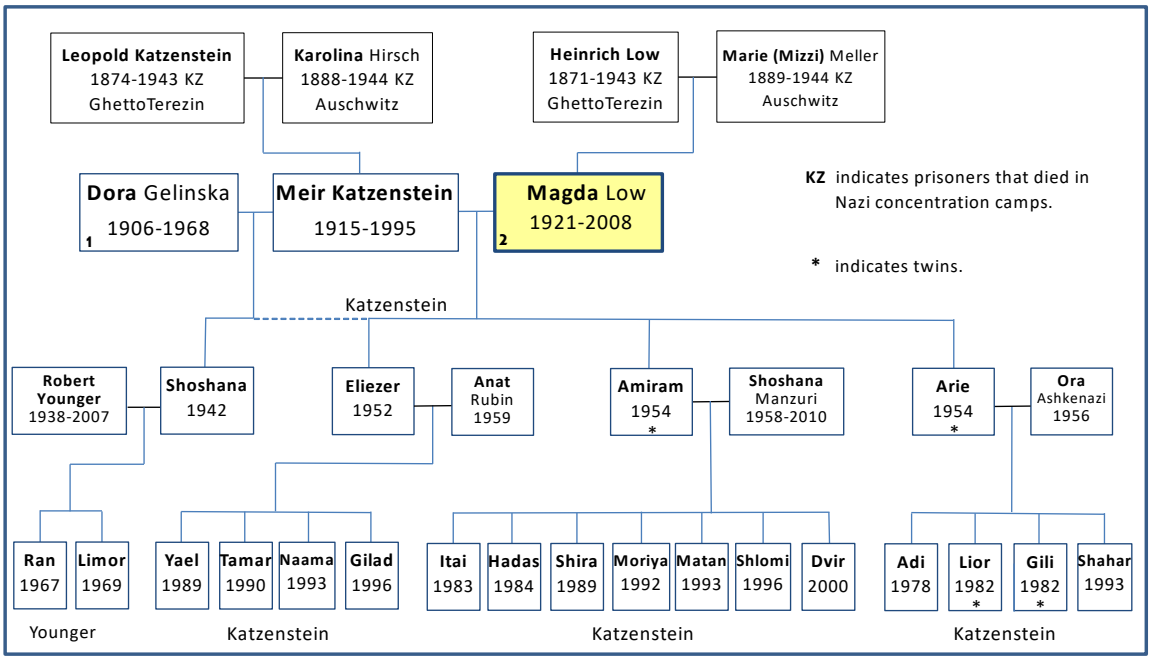

Figure 22: Katzenstein family tree

Figure 23: Grandson Gilad Katzenstein guides an American youth group in the Auschwitz camp, July2019

Addendum: The lost Torah scroll from Frydek-Mistek

(Eliezer Katzenstein)

My mother, Magda Katzenstein (nee Löw), was born in a small Czech town called Frydek-Mistek. The town was home to a prosperous, though not an especially religious, Jewish community. In 1865 my great-grandfather, who was the head of the Jewish community at the time, initiated the construction of a big and magnificent synagogue.

After the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia in March 1939, most of the synagogues in that country were burnt down. In June 1939, my grandfather's synagogue was also burned to the ground and everything in it was destroyed, or so at least thought Magda until year 2000.

One fall day in 2000 Magda read an article in the monthly journal of Czechoslovakian emigrants that caused her to skip a heartbeat. The article clarified that in their well organized, premeditated arson the Germans made a point to take out all the Torah scrolls and transfer them to the Jewish museum in Prague for "safe keeping". There they registered and cataloged all the 1564 Torah scrolls they collected.

After the war, all the Torah scrolls in the Jewish museum of Prague were transferred to a small and very damp synagogue in another neighborhood of Prague. In 1964, a delegation of rabbis from England arrived to Prague with the intent of taking the Torah scrolls out of the synagogue. The communist government agreed to sell the scrolls and they were transferred to the Westminster synagogue in London. Since then all 1564 Torah scrolls have been professionally refurbished and rehabilitated after being severely damaged by dampness and mold.

An organization called the Czechoslovakian Torah Network was established for the purpose of distributing the reconstructed Torah scrolls to various Jewish communities throughout the world. The name and address of the organization's secretary in California was mentioned in the article my mother had read. The article also included a list of the Czech community Torah scrolls that had already been distributed. The name of my grandfather's town, Frydek-Mistek, also appeared on that list.

Magda wrote a letter to the secretary of the organization asking her where the Torah scroll from her community can be found. In a heartfelt reply the secretary, Susan Broyer replied that the Torah scroll is in the Beth Israel synagogue in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA. Afterwards, my mother also got a letter from Robert Capon, the man that personally went to London and purchased with his own money the Frydek-Mistek Torah scroll for his synagogue.

Robert Capon was very happy because he was sure that not a single Jew from the town survived the war (in fact, only four actually survived). Already in his first letter he invited my mother to come visit their community as their guest. My mother suggested that her older sister Katia Gould, who lives in London, also join. Robert asked that they be honored guests of the

community for a week, during which time Holocaust Memorial Day was also being commemorated.

In 2001 my mother and her sister went on their journey. At the airport they were received by the Capon family. At a festive reception at the family's home members of the Beth Israel congregation wanted to learn about the survivors of the Frydek-Mistek community. During the course of the evening they went to the synagogue, which belongs to the reform movement, in order that my mother and her sister could reunite with their Torah scroll. The Torah scroll is housed in a beautiful glass cabinet, enclosed with three colorful glass windows.

Figure 24: Katia Gould and Magda Katzenstein

"My sister and I were excited because we remembered when our two brothers, Hermann and Hans, read from the Torah for their Bar Mitzvah ceremonies, and our father who prayed during the high holidays", my mother said, "I myself used to sing in the synagogue's choir. The rabbi of 'Beth Israel' explained that the Torah scroll could not be used for prayer service because they were unable to fully reconstruct it. Instead they use it on Holocaust Memorial Day and for study purposes for children of the community who study on Sundays." My mother continued, "the ceremony for Holocaust Memorial took place before Friday night services on Sabbath eve. The synagogue was filled to the brim. The Torah scroll of our town was laid on the podium and my sister and I asked to stand on both sides of the Torah. The congregation, men and women as one, sung Holocaust memorial songs in Hebrew and English."

According to my mother, "the climax of our visit was meeting the children of Charlottesville, who asked intelligent questions about our childhood, about the war years my sister went through when London was being bombarded, about the camps I was in, how I was saved and also a lot of questions about Israel. Their interest warmed my heart and this was a touching experience, just like the rest of this unforgettable visit."

Eliezer Katzenstein

CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE

CHARLOTTESVILLE - VIRGINIA - 1762

PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, Congregation Beth Israel holds in its memory the lost Jewish community of Frydek-Mistek, Czechoslovakia by preserving a 200 year old Torah Scroll stolen from that community by the Nazis; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Magda Katzenstein and Mrs. Katia Gould are among a handful of survivors of the Holocaust from the town of Frydek-Mistek; and

WHEREAS, Magda and Katia and their families have built lives based upon faith, courage and hope; and

WHEREAS, Magda and Katia have journeyed from Israel and the United Kingdom to meet the Charlottesville Jewish community and to be reunited with the Torah from their youth; and

WHEREAS, Magda and Katia are being honored by the Jewish community of Congregation Beth Israel;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, J. Blake Caravati, Mayor of the City of Charlottesville, on behalf of the Charlottesville City Council and Charlottesville community, do hereby proclaim Friday, April 20, 2001 as a day of Holocaust remembrance, and urge all citizens to join in recognizing these remarkable women and to remember the lost Jewish community of Frydek-Mistek.

Signed and sealed this 20th day of April, 2001.

J. Blake Caravati
Mayor

Figure 25: Certificate of Recognition and Appreciation from the Municipality of Charlottesville city (Virginia, USA, April 20th 2001)

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