

Thank you, Rabbi Billy, for the privilege of sharing my memories of my father, who passed away last spring. And to all of you, G'mar tov!

My father was born in 1925 in Karlsruhe, Germany to a cultured family. At fifteen, two Gestapo officers paid a visit. "Very nice guys," my father remembered.

"Let's have a nice cup of coffee, and maybe some pastries," they said. "Then you can gather up your belongings and we'll drive to the train station together."

There, they were permitted a suitcase per person and ten marks for the family before being deported to concentration camps in France.

Conditions were primitive, food scarce, sanitation poor, and disease prevalent. At 16, my father was taken alone to a forced labor camp in Brest, 700 miles north. There, he unloaded concrete from the ships. "Back breaking work," he remembered.

One morning, during 5am roll call, he collapsed to the ground with hepatitis and was sent to the commandant's office.

"What's wrong with *you*?"

"I'm sick,"

"Go to the infirmary and bring me back a note. If it says you're healthy, you'll wish you had never been born!"

My father got a note. He thought it prudent to read it first. "Prisoner Kahn is healthy and fit for work," it read. What to do with this death sentence? He tore it up into a million pieces, threw it into the latrine, and returned to the commandant's office.

"Where is the note?"

"The doctor didn't give me one."

"What did he say?"

"That I have hepatitis."

"Well, any idiot could see that! Your eyes are as yellow as lemons! Here, I'll write you one myself."

Back in the barracks, he was woken by four German jack boots.

"Why aren't you working?"

"I'm sick. I have a note from the Commandant."

"Let's see it."

He handed it over.

“Well, this just means you have to report for work at 8 o’clock instead of 5 o’clock--now back to the docks!”

And so it went.

Six months later, he was sent back south. In an overcrowded cattle car, he got into a scuffle with another prisoner. An SS officer yanked him off the train, unholstered his gun, and pressed it against his head. “This is what we do with troublemakers like you!” Just then, the train whistle blew. Distracted, the officer ordered him back on board. Reunited with his family, his clothes hung from him as if on hangers. He often said, “When I turned sideways, you couldn’t see me.”

After two years in concentration camps, the Kahns secured passage to Cuba, where they spent four more years before emigrating to the U.S. My father didn’t stay long, though. Six months later, he was drafted into the army and sent to Japan. Back in the U.S., he married my mother, became an accountant, started a business, and had children.

Growing up, the Holocaust was a regular dinner table topic. Struggling through German meals of chicken gizzards or chicken hearts, wishing for the spaghetti and meatballs that occasionally found its way to the menu, I’d often hear, “I would have *killed* for that in the camps!”

Perhaps my father’s experience with hunger affected me more than I realize. I enjoy a love affair with my spatulas, scraping reluctant pools of gravy into Tupperware containers. By now, my wife knows not to throw away anything I put in the refrigerator, even after they’ve hosted novel life forms. In the land of plenty, I’m appalled as perfectly good food is thrown into the trash. Did I inherit my father’s trauma, or the prudence that the party might not last forever?

Back in the days of TV dinners and instant coffee, decades before sushi deluxe and spicy tuna, my father would take us to the neighborhood Japanese restaurant. He knew all the foods on the menu. I tried sukiyaki. He also took us to the local Cuban restaurant, where he ordered in Spanish and introduced me to bistec palomilla, picadillo, and batidos.

Most importantly for today, though, my father had a profound influence on my Jewish identity. Do I believe in God? Well, that’s between me and me. But I feel Jewish

because I am the son of a survivor, because my father escaped Germany, France, and a world of antisemitism. And that's Jewish enough for me right now.

My father died last spring, on April 11, three weeks shy of his 95th birthday. He had been in a nursing home for five years and gradually declining. We got the call that he had been diagnosed with Covid19 and on palliative care. The nursing home was in quarantine and closed to visitors. We never got to see him after that, never got to say goodbye. So I'll say it now.

“Goodbye, Dad, I love you.”