

Survivors At The Location Of KL Bergen-Belsen



This photograph was taken in 1995, and shows a group of Slovak participants that had come to a reunion on the occasion of a memorial to the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. From left to right: König, Kollmann, Alica Urbanova, Kucera and I, Ladislav Urban. All of us were prisoners in this concentration camp during World War II.

We were in Bergen-Belsen from the end of October up until its liberation [15th April 1945 – Editor's note]. It lasted 7 months. Not far from our blockhouse, to the east, was another, empty one. The blockhouses were separated from each other by a fence and gate. Around the third or fourth day after our arrival, a transport of women arrived there. It wasn't until then that we saw what kind of shape people who'd been in concentration camps since 1942 were in. They looked horrible. They were more dead than alive. They were so starved that they ate everything we didn't eat. I have to emphasize that in the beginning we weren't used to such food.

Finally, in the coldest depths of winter, we were put into some sort of "hall". I'd guess it to be at the end of January and beginning of February 1945. It wasn't until then that we saw that the whole camp looked like. We ended up close to the so-called "Main Street". We called it Lager Hauptstrasse. It was a long corridor about 35 to 40 meters wide. In certain sections, let's say every kilometer, there were army kitchens, a shelter with huge cauldrons. That's where they cooked that swill, the soup. Around them were mounds of spuds prepared for use. But I don't know where they were putting them, because there were almost none in the soup we used to get. If you were on good terms with someone there, they'd throw you a spud over the fence, or an onion, which would sometimes be there too. Some of the SS-men walking around would entertain themselves by picking up a potato or onion and throwing it amongst some children. Then they'd entertain themselves watching them fighting over it.

We had almost no contact with the Germans. You had to avoid them. They were capable of playing cruel jokes on us in the name of fun. For example, women guards used to go for walks after lunch

beside the last blockhouse we lived in. Each SS-woman had a German Shepherd with her. At that time it was useful to leave the latrine. Sick people that had diarrhea sat there for even tens of minutes. They had cramps and weren't able to empty themselves. A German woman would let her dog loose on a sitting person, and the dog would push him into the shit. No one would pull a poor sod like that out again.

The sectors were divided into sections, and everything was separated by narrow alleys that were surrounded by barbed wire. These narrow alleys led into Lager Hauptstrasse. People had to walk down these alleys in single file. You entered the alleys through a gate by which a guards stood. The gates were about a meter wide, so that more than one person couldn't go through at a time. To the right of us was a little blockhouse where Polish Jewish women lived. This little blockhouse was very pretty. It had curtains, inside were checkered blankets, and it was clean. There were about 30 beds. These women worked in the kitchen, and we children got to know them. At that time I had a big problem with shoes. I was growing, so were my feet, and I needed bigger shoes. My feet hurt so much that I couldn't walk. These women contacted someone from the stores for me, and exchanged my shoes for me. At night they used to let us go there. It was dark, it was all arranged with the guard, otherwise we wouldn't have been able to cross the alley. We used to go there in twos, and would get fed. Usually they'd give us a larger piece of meat cooked in that beet soup. It looked almost like a piece of cooked bacon, and bread to go with it. We had about a quarter hour to eat, and then we had to quickly disappear. We children would always take turns there. When there were two of us, one waited outside, and then we'd change places and then we'd go back together. There were about 30 of us children, all of us were from Slovakia. Not all of us risked such nighttime outings.

Right beside the Polish women's blockhouse was a kitchen, where they cooked for German soldiers. Their blockhouse was situated in such a way that two doors led to the fence. Through the window you could either jump into the part that led towards us, or to the entry into Hauptstrasse. We didn't hand around much there, as it was dangerous. The only functional well in the entire sector was about a hundred meters away from that blockhouse. Towards the end of the war, before the liberation, there was almost no water anywhere in the camp. The water in all the wells around was infected. Typhus was very widespread, and people were afraid to drink. Those of us that were still running around the camp used to go to that well for water. Gradually long queues formed there. People stood in rows five wide, and waited for water for two or even three days. Thousands of people stood in line. The way we did it was that several of us would stand in various parts of a line, and after several hours we'd change places. So everyone who got a liter of water, you didn't get more than that, then shared with the others. When someone else got water, he again shared it, and so on it went. My brother was already in close proximity to the well, it could have maybe been another hour or two, and he'd have gotten to the water. Suddenly a tractor fully loaded with canisters arrived, and the Germans wanted to start drawing water into the canisters. You couldn't pull more than seven or eight liters of water out of the well at one time. At that rate it could have taken all day. The prisoners rebelled, and didn't want to let the Germans past. I saw that they'd taken a table out of the nearby kitchen through the window. I thought to myself that something was going to take place there. I stood a ways away, leaning against a tree, and watched. Suddenly an SS soldier got up on the table, and I saw that they were handing him a submachine gun. I began yelling, and suddenly he started firing. He mowed down everyone standing by the well. My brother

was exactly in that bunch into which he was firing. I hid behind the tree, so there was no way he could shoot through it. When he suddenly changed magazines, everyone who could ran. I also started running away. My brother didn't arrive for a long time. He returned the morning of the second day. There'd been such a brouhaha there that he'd fallen into the well. An SS-man pulled him out. They then held him somewhere. When he arrived he had the cup with which he'd set out for water, full of pea soup. They'd even dried him off and given him dry clothes. This took place about ten days before the liberation of the concentration camp.