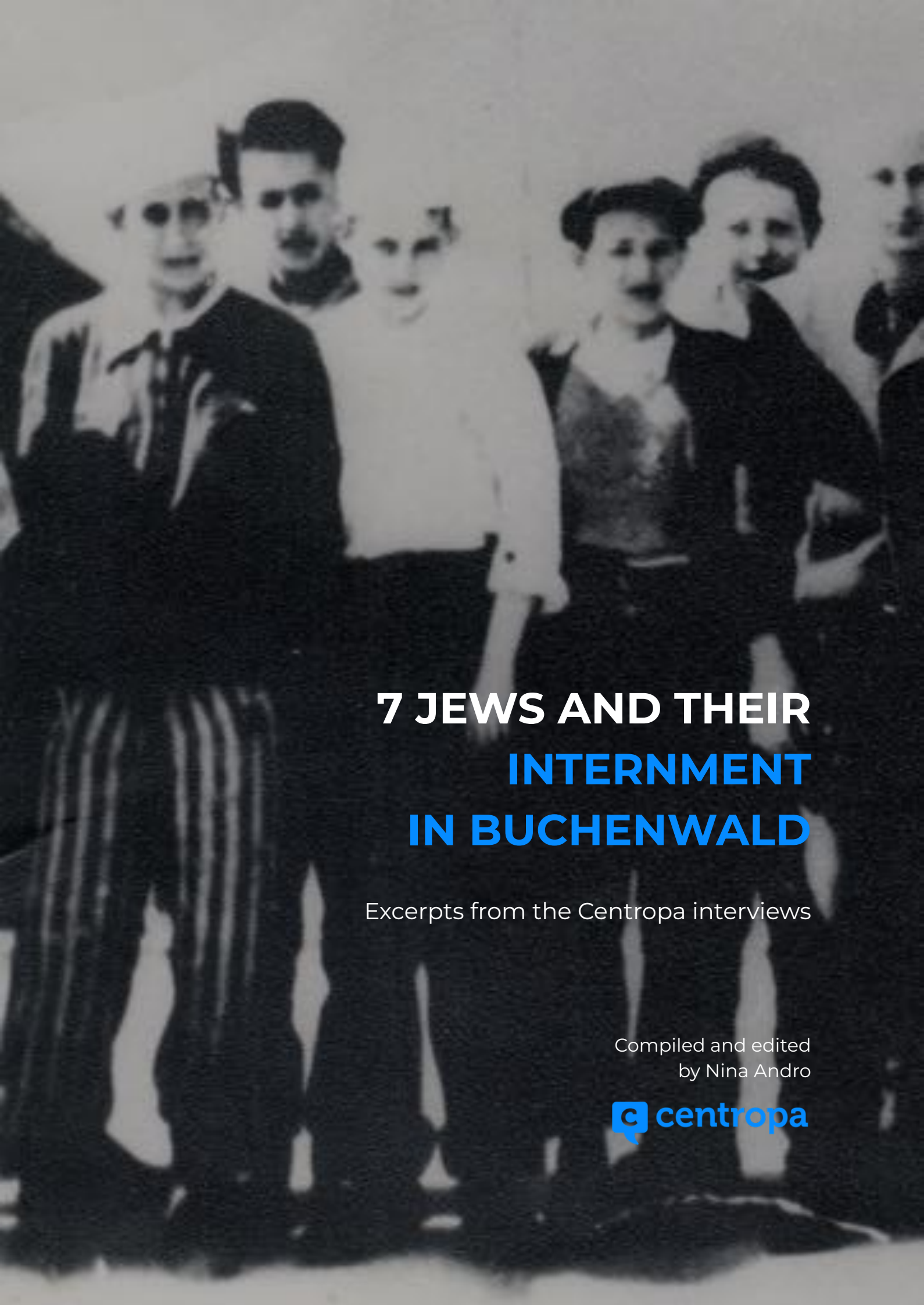

7 JEWS AND THEIR INTERNMENT IN BUCHENWALD

Excerpts from the Centropa interviews

Compiled and edited
by Nina Andro

centropa

“We lived there in a large army tent for five hundred people in bunks four high. At night two men would have one blanket together to cover themselves. The tent wasn't heated, so we were constantly cold … When we'd scurry by the SS, sometimes an SS soldier would snatch someone's cap from his head, throw it behind him, and say, 'Get the cap!' And when someone set out to fetch it, they'd shoot him for attempting to escape. Then when in Germany an attempted assassination of Hitler took place in a Munich beer hall on 8 November 1939, we were all designated ‘sympathizers of the perpetrators’ and didn't get anything to eat for three days.”

– Artur Radvansky

“We didn’t know the days or dates. We didn’t observe any Jewish traditions or celebrate holidays. We didn’t even know when they were. Jews didn’t even pray. All we could think about was going to sleep as soon as possible.”

– Mozes Katz

Image: Aerial photograph of Buchenwald Concentration Camp, taken by the U.S. Airforce following liberation. End of April 1945. *(Attribution: U.S. Air Reconnaissance. National Archives Washington)*

Cover image: Laszlo Nussbaum in Buchenwald, 1945.

Introduction

Centropa is a Jewish historical institute with offices in Vienna, Budapest, Hamburg, and Washington. In 2000 the first phase of our activities began with a ten-year-long oral history project that collected interviews with 1,200 elderly Jews still living in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Baltics, and the Balkans. Rather than focus solely on respondents' experiences during the Holocaust, Centropa asked respondents to share their memories of the entire 20th century – just as they lived it. Centropa digitized 24,800 family pictures and documents, including annotations from the interviewee. Please visit Centropa's website, www.centropa.org, to find English translations of our interviews and annotated photographs. For academics wishing to access transcriptions in the original language, please contact our office in Vienna (office@centropa.org).

The Concentration Camp System

Beginning in 1933, the Nazi party built numerous camps intended to detain so-called "enemies of the state," In the early concentration camps built in Germany, most detainees were political prisoners (i.e., communists, socialists, and social democrats) or 'asocials,' a term Nazis used to refer to criminals, homosexuals, Roma, Sinti, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Nazis created different kinds of camps, including forced labor camps (where Nazis exploited forced labor of prisoners for economic gain), transit camps (temporary holding facilities for prisoners), prisoner-of-war camps (which were used exclusively for Allied prisoners of war), and killing centers (whose sole purpose was the systematic execution of large numbers of prisoners).

In many forced labor camps, prisoners were systematically malnourished,exposed to lethal working conditions,and subject to brutal violence. Camp authorities intended to overwork prisoners to death while extracting the maximum amount of labor out of them. Prisoners were sometimes leased out to private firms, with their wages paid directly to the SS. This served the dual purpose of meeting labor shortages while also economically benefiting the German Reich. In many camps, Nazis conducted medical experiments on prisoners. Many victims of medical experimentation did not survive or became permanently disabled. In 1934, the concentration camp system was reorganized under the direct authority of the SS and police. This meant that the concentration camp system was no longer subject to judicial or administrative review beyond the SS and police structure. The Nazis could imprison anyone indefinitely without charge and treat prisoners in any manner. After the outbreak of World War II, Heinrich Himmler forbade (except under extraordinary circumstances) the release of any and all prisoners for the duration of the war.

After the implementation of Hitler's "Final Solution" in 1941, the Nazis began to build large killing centers in occupied Poland, the country with the largest Jewish population in occupied Europe. These camps were designed to murder large groups of people as quickly and effectively as possible. The earliest death camps used mobile gas vans, which utilized carbon monoxide gas from the van's exhaust pipes in order to murder prisoners. Later death camps used gas chambers and pesticides like Zyklon B. Only a small number of those imprisoned in Nazi camps survived.

Conditions in concentration camps declined rapidly in the last months of the war, leading to mass death due to severe overcrowding, disease, exposure, and starvation. As Allied forces began to surround Germany at the end of the war, Nazis sent thousands of concentration camp prisoners on forced 'death marches' by foot and 'evacuation transports' by vehicle toward camps further away from the front lines. The true number of victims of the concentration camp system is difficult to estimate, but historians place the number between 1,885,889 and 2,045,215. By the end of the Second World War on 7 May 1945, the Nazis had murdered more than six million European Jews.

Sources:

Nazi Camps. Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps

Concentration Camp System: In Depth. Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth?series=10

Image: Prisoners standing during roll call in Buchenwald. Each wears a striped hat and uniform bearing colored, triangular badges and identification numbers. *(Attribution: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Robert A. Schmuhl)*

Buchenwald: The Camp

Construction on Buchenwald concentration camp began in July 1937 in Ettersberg near Weimar. The camp's purpose was to detain so-called political opponents of National Socialism, including Jews, Sinti and Roma, German military deserters, and 'asocials', such as homosexuals, homeless or 'work-shy' people, Jehovah's Witnesses, and ex-convicts. The camp became one of the largest concentration camps within German borders, featuring thirty three wooden barracks, a prisoner infirmary, workshops, a railway station, a brothel, a crematorium, and even a zoo.

The prisoners of Buchenwald served as forced labor for the German armaments industry within the camp's extensive sub-camp system and at various brick factories in the area. Prisoners were frequently 'rented out' by the SS to private firms from these sub-camps, where living and working conditions were often worse than in the main camp of Buchenwald itself. The first female prisoners arrived at Buchenwald and its sub-camp system in 1943. Initially, they were brought from Ravensbrück camp to work in Buchenwald's brothel, where they were forced into sexual slavery. Later, when Buchenwald took over the administration of several smaller sub-camps of Ravensbrück in 1944, the number of female prisoners in Buchenwald increased dramatically. By the end of 1944, 63,048 men and 24,210 women were imprisoned in Buchenwald and its sub-camps. More than a third of these prisoners were under twenty-one years old.

In the early months of 1945, as Allied forces advanced, the German army began evacuating camps close to the frontline. Prisoners were moved to camps within German borders, and Buchenwald became the destination of numerous of these 'evacuation transports'.Buchenwald became even more overcrowded, with thousands of prisoners lodged in tents and exposed to the elements. Malnourishment, typhus, and tuberculosis spread among inmates. At the end of February, one-third of the prisoners were Jewish. Between April 7th and 10th, with the threat of the U.S.Army's advance looming large, approximately twenty-eight thousand inmates were forced to march or were transported in freight trains towards other German camps. On April 11th, 1945, Buchenwald prisoners stormed the camp's watchtowers and killed the remaining guards after receiving news of the advancing American army's imminent arrival. They seized control of the camp, which by that time contained only twenty-one thousand inmates, before greeting the American army later that day. Upon his arrival at Buchenwald, U.S. Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote: *"Nothing has ever shocked me as much as that sight."*

Between 1937 and April 1945, over five hundred and fifteen thousand people lost their lives in Buchenwald as a result of torture, starvation, execution, medical experiments, and disease. Hundreds more died after liberation as a result of their imprisonment, and no record was kept of the death toll of the evacuation transports and 'death' marches. The number of victims is however estimated to be between twelve thousand and fifteen thousand.

Source: Buchenwald Memorial. Buchenwald and Mittlebau-Dora Memorials Foundation. https://www.buchenwald.de/en/72/

Image: Gatehouse of Buchenwald Concentration Camp Memorial. Note the clock, whose time is permanently set at 3:15 PM, the moment of the liberation by U.S. troops. *(Attribution: Chiode)*

Image: Entrance gate of the Buchenwald concentration camp, inscribed *Jedem das Seine* ("To each his own"). *(Attribution: Martin Kraft)*

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MIKLOS KALLOS

Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Interviewer: Cosmina Paul

Date of interview: February 2004

Miklos Kallos in his office in Cluj Napoca, 1952.

Read Miklos Kallos's biography here

Click here to see his family pictures

Miklos Kallos was born in 1926 in Oradea, Romania, the only child of Helena Schwartz and Zoltan Kallos. Their family was orthodox and strictly middle-class, and Miklos's father, Zoltan, worked regularly for the town's Jewish community, which was large and culturally vibrant. At home, they spoke mostly Hungarian and some Yiddish. Miklos has very fond memories of his school years but also recalls how, as a child, he was forced to do four to five hours of forced labor per week, just like all the other Jews in town. When Oradea's ghetto was created in 1944, their family home fell inside its borders, but the family had to accommodate over thirty new lodgers in very cramped conditions. The Jews of Oradea were deported between May to June 1944. Miklos's family was deported to Auschwitz. There, he stayed with his father, but they were separated from his mother.This was the last time they ever saw her. From there, Miklos and his father were sent to Buchenwald. Miklos recalls the large communist organization within the camp structure, which protected the young from the worst of the SS brutality and subsequently earned his admiration. Miklos's father became so weak from the forced labor that he was sent back to Auschwitz and murdered after just three months in September 1944. By the time Buchenwald was liberated, on April 11th, 1944, Miklos weighed just 36 kilograms after suffering from bilateral cavernous tuberculosis. After recovering, he returned home to Oradea to find his home had been destroyed.None of his family members had returned from the camps. Miklos became a fervent member of the Communist Party and graduated from high school. He went on to study philosophy at Bolyai University, eventually becoming the head of its Philosophy Department until 1980. He married Katalin Havas, a clothing technician, in 1949. Together they had two sons, Peter and Gyorgy. Miklos was the president of the Jewish community of Oradea from 1997 to 2001 and remains an active member of the community.

"[The Jews of Oradea were deported between May 23rd and June 27th,1944 – a total of approx. twenty-two thousand people.] When we got off the stock cars [in Auschwitz], women were separated from the men. It was then that I saw my mother for the last time. My father and I went together through the damned routine of the arrival: disinfection, bath, shaving, leaving our clothes, putting on those striped pyjamas. We stayed together until September.

This is what happened: I got to a camp called Buchenwald, which was subsequently dubbed 'the red camp,' because the German Communists, and others, like the French, had an anti-fascist committee there, which dominated the internal life of the camp, so to speak.

The place had been founded in 1936 and initially served to imprison German Communists. Like in most camps, the internal control over Buchenwald had been seized by the regular criminals who were doing time there too. They would bully and maltreat the others, just like in the American movies where every prison has its own ruling gang of inmates.

The SS wasn't comfortable with this situation because it caused disorder in the camp, and they gradually reached an agreement with the communist groups. The SS would let them control the camp on the inside, provided they maintained order and granted any other request.

For instance, if the SS said they needed three thousand people for work, they expected to have those people waiting in line the next day. So an internal arrangement was made. I didn't know there was an anti-fascist committee inside the camp. All I knew was that there were German communists. I only found out about those other things later.

Everyone wore a number in the camp. Mine was 58319.My father's was 58320. There were also numbers higher than 60000. If an inmate had the number 12 or 8 or 9, it meant he had been there since 1936, which automatically placed him among the aristocracy of the convicts, so to speak.

These people were the ones who had positions, for inmates had their own positions: head of the block, kapo [Note: a concentration camp inmate appointed by the SS to be in charge of a work gang], etc. The anti-fascist committee assured order in the camp indeed.

What exactly did this committee do? First they recruited communists, socialists, and social democrats and put them in more or less important positions. When I got to Buchenwald, the young Frenchmen started to question me: who I was, where I came from, what and how I had been before?

This was a stage of the recruiting process. If they found either people who shared their ideas or outstanding personalities – renowned scientists or writers etc. – they somehow isolated them and put them in safer places.

Here is how things went: Around the camp were placed the SS barracks and a unit of the Gestapo. The Gestapo regularly followed the political inmates from the camp and sometimes they came looking for someone. This didn't mean anything good because they would always seize that inmate and either torture or kill him.

Then this committee would remove the number from the chest of the one who was wanted and switch it with the number of a newly deceased, thus changing their identities. They would inform the camp's registration office – '*Schreibstube*,' they called it – where all the administrative work was done.

Jorge Semprun was also working there. ‘Watch out, that guy is no longer X, but Y,’ and so they would hide the endangered man. [Note: Jorge Semprun was born in Madrid in 1923, deported as Spanish communist and French resistance fighter to Buchenwald in 1943, and liberated in 1945. He distinguished himself as a writer, with novels like ‘*Le grand voyage*’ (1963) and ‘*La guerre est finie*’ (1966) – he wrote about his experience in Buchenwald.]

Towards the end, not long before the liberation, the Germans started to organize evacuation shipments, especially for the Jews.They simply massacred them along the way. There weren’t too many survivors among those who left with these shipments, that’s for sure. So when the order was given to gather, say, one thousand people, the committee scattered them in different shacks. They were sabotaging these measures, in other words.

But what personally got to me about these Communists was their rather idealistic belief that youth had to be spared for the future, that young men were what the future needed. And they took care of them indeed. There was a children’s shack at Buchenwald, and they provided them with a special diet.

There were people who taught them, told them stories, tutored them, and looked after them. Whenever an easier workplace would come up – as was in my case – they would choose young people for it, to save them.

I didn’t stay at Buchenwald too long, only a few weeks. Buchenwald was a large concentration camp and had several smaller labor camps. They would send you to one of them, then you’d come back, then go to another and back again. So our stay at Buchenwald was rather intermittent.

My father and I returned to Buchenwald from a very tough labor camp at Magdeburg. After three months my father totally collapsed, both physically and mentally. He was nothing but a wreck. The Communists recruited me when a new commando was formed, in a place where conditions were supposed to be easier.

We were about two hundred young people there, some elderly. I took my father with me so that we could be together. On countless occasions, they came to check on us, and my father got dismissed from there twice. Eventually, he was sent back to Auschwitz, where he was murdered. This happened around September 1944.

There are some ethical and moral issues here. On what grounds did those who had positions in the camp decide who would live and who wouldn’t? Who gave them the right to keep me alive, in a safe place, and to send my father to his death? Well, these people took upon themselves these duties – these ethical burdens, so to speak – in the name of the ideals they had about the future.They believed youth were needed to build a new world.

In any case, what I went through there explains what I became and how my life evolved in the following decades. The communists I met there inspired me with genuine admiration. Everyone is aware – and I am aware of it too– that, after the liberation, many of them became

activists and leaders of the newly-installed communist regime, while others, who were in the same camp, were the victims of their fellow communists who had turned into leaders.

These things are known. But all I can tell you is that, back in the camp, they all behaved admirably. And it's not just me who claims that. This is what all those who were there and who wrote about the camp.

There is a certain Kogon, who is a Christian Democrat. He wrote the first and the best work about Buchenwal,d and he admitted that what the communists did there is worthy of all the respect. I hadn't read Marxist literature, I knew nothing about Marxism, and I knew nothing about communism. I just met these people and I felt an attraction toward what they believed in.

Here's a private incident. I became very ill in the camp with bilateral cavernous tuberculosis – impossible to treat in the camp's facilities. I normally weighed seventy kilograms, but I ended up weighing thirty-six kilograms because of the conditions there – so I was a wreck myself.

After the liberation, on April 11th, 1944, they took me to a sort of sanatorium. The place was called Blankenheim, near Weimar, not far from Buchenwald. Well, the conditions were those of a sanatorium, but there was no treatment or medication. The food was good and the place was properly maintained, quiet and clean though. They had a complex of buildings for the leaders of the *Hitlerjugend,* and the conditions were good. I spent several weeks there.

At a certain point, the area where Buchenwald and Weimar were, which had been under American occupation, had to be turned over to the Soviets as it was to become a part of the future German Democratic Republic. So the people at the sanatorium were asked where they wanted to go. 'Go to France or Sweden,' we were told, 'the Red Cross will take care of you.'

Then a doctor I had met in the camp, a Transylvanian communist who's still alive and is a good friend of mine, came from Buchenwald to Blankenheim and told me: 'You have to come home.As the communists say, we've got a new world to build.' And so I came home. It was only several years later that I began to read Marxist theoretical works and form an idea about what communism was.

In any case, after everything I had gone through, after everything that had happened to me, and especially after the weeks following my return to Oradea – where I couldn't find any trace of the people I had once known, or of my house, or my belongings – I was through with religion.

Nevertheless, a few months after the liberation, I still went to the synagogue from time to time, on Saturdays and for the fall holidays of 1945. I didn't do it out of religiousness but because I missed an atmosphere that I knew so well and that I had grown up with Yet that atmosphere was never to be found again. Meanwhile I finally became a member of the Communist Party. By doing that, my instinctive appreciation for some communists became

official. I also adopted their materialist philosophy to a large extent, so I parted with religion for a long time.

Here is what I personally think. We all went through our own terrible events, but these events look rather similar from the outside. Ask anybody who went from the ghetto to Auschwitz and they will tell you the same thing: there were ninety of us in one single carriage, there was no food, there were two cans – one for water and one for physiological needs – there was no room to move, lie or sit, many died after three or four days spent in the carriage, men were lined up on the Auschwitz platform, etc.

I mean, these things may appear unique to each individual, but they are all the same for someone who was never there. There is no way for the people who didn't experience what we experienced to fully realize what we went through, just like we ourselves didn't fully realize what those Poles who came to Oradea had gone through.

Here's a small incident from my own life experience. After I came back, the synagogue's guard, a very decent Hungarian man who was nice to me all the time, asked me how it had been. I started to tell him; after an hour or so, this question came from him or maybe from his wife: 'So you didn't even get apples there?' It was then that I realized that he hadn't understood one single word.

Sure, there are plenty of movies and books nowadays, and people can get an idea about what went on. But in order to make one's own experience have some relevance for someone else, one needs to have a writer's force, a special talent. There's another thing. Many books were written and many films were made on this topic since then, and people who are my age get confused sometimes and mix their personal experience with what they only found out afterward.

I have these two examples. Most interviews start like this: 'We got off on the Auschwitz platform and saw the furnace of the crematorium.' They saw what? Who could have known that was the furnace of the crematorium? This is what they found out later. When I came back from deportation, I was still not sure whether my father and mother had died or not. There was no way I could have known that for sure. We only began to find out these things later.

There are others who say: 'They lined us up and, at a certain point, I found myself before Dr. Mengele, who sent us either to the right or…' How could they have possibly known that was Mengele? Did anyone know that was Mengele? It's very hard to stay true to one's memory, to give a thorough account of what one saw and add nothing to it.

These are some of the reasons why I have avoided giving interviews and accounts about the camp. Camps differed indeed. In some of them, the treatment was really harsh; in others, the treatment was better. But they were all alike in their essence: the labor, the chores were all the same everywhere. So it's hard to make any personalization or individualization."

ARTUR RADVANSKY

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Martina Marsalkova

Date of Interview: June 2005

Artur Radvansky's wedding photo in Prague, 1946.

Read Artur Radvansky's biography here

Click here to see his family pictures

Artur Radvansky's family came mostly from the Polish Beskid Mountains. He grew up in Radvanice with two younger brothers. His father was a store owner and his mother was a seamstress. As a child, he learned German from an aunt who was from the Sudetenland. Artur describes the Radvanice of his childhood as heterogenous and harmonious.He had friends who were Czech, German, and Polish, and together they would often go skiing and dancing. After the German invasion of 1939, Artur tried to flee to Poland with his father. They were caught on the road and sent to Buchenwald. There he experienced truly horrific treatment, and his father died of starvation in his arms. In April 1942, he was sent to Ravensbrück, then later to Sachsenhausen in September 1942. There he worked in the infamous 'shoe-testing' workshop and a brick factory. He was also part of an unsuccessful prisoner uprising. Artur was transported to Auschwitz on October 15th, 1942, where he was tattooed with his prisoner number and assigned to work in the hospital and later the gynecology ward. While in Auschwitz he also met his future wife, Alzbeta. He was sent on a death march to Ebensee, a subcamp of Mauthausen, on March 17th, 1945, where he was liberated by the U.S. Army on May 6th, 1945. After regaining his strength, Artur returned to Prague only to discover his whole family had perished in the Holocaust. In Prague, he connected again with Alzbeta and they were married in 1946 in the Old-New Synagogue. Artur went on to study and work as a chemist. Together Artur and Alzbeta had two children, Jiri and Anna. Artur has been an active member of the Jewish community of Prague since the 1970s.

"That was the last time I saw my mother, who was still frightened out of her wits from ten days earlier when the Gestapo had brutally beaten and arrested us. We said goodbye to her, to my brothers, grandma, and grandpa. My father and I took some winter clothing, backpacks, and food for the road, and we went to the Ludvik pit. We found a flashlight, and my friends led us over to the other side. When we had been on the road for three days and were about forty kilometers from Ostrava, the Polish War broke out [note: this refers to the German invasion of Poland]. We wanted to go to Kraków to join Svoboda's army, but in Jawiszovice, my father's hometown, we were stopped by the military police.Although we had new identification, they arrested us due to my father's 'Jewish' appearance. So we arrived at the

Ravic collection camp, which lies about thirty kilometers before Katowice. After 14 days in Ravic, we were put on a transport to Buchenwald. They took us by train to Weimar, and there they drove us out of the wagon and herded us to the edge of town. Whoever couldn't go on and fell from exhaustion was beaten or even shot.

And so we got to Buchenwald. Buchenwald was a concentration camp built in 1936. It was located in a forest in the mountains. We lived there in a large army tent for five hundred people in bunks four high. At night two men would have one blanket together to cover themselves. The tent wasn't heated, so we were constantly cold. They also didn't give us any shoes so the cold was even worse. For clothing, we got a blue and white striped cap, a jacket, and pants from the Germans. For work in the quarry, we got wooden shoes and rags instead of socks.

All the people in this tent had RU [*Rückkehr Unerwünscht*] written in their documents, meaning ‘return undesirable’, so we were sentenced to extermination there. They helped us to this end both by refusing us medical treatment and providing miserable sanitary facilities, which were latrines scooped out of the ground. We couldn't wash, and as far as food goes, all you could say was that perhaps even pigs in pigsties had better food than we did. It wasn’t only that the food was miserable.Sometimes not all the prisoners got to eat. In a span of a half-hour, food had to be distributed to three thousand people, and those who didn't manage to get food within that time simply remained without food. We ate from unwashed dishes and cutlery, and the soup sometimes even contained dirt and turnips that were fed to livestock. Despite the food not being anything to write home about, when after half an hour the remaining food had to be dumped out on the ground, most people threw themselves at it and ate it from the ground. Within three days there was a dysentery epidemic, and people died en masse.

We also had to work in a quarry, where we would walk up and down hills. Those wooden shoes slipped around nicely. We had to carry heavy rocks uphill for the construction of army barracks. I always tried to give my father the lightest ones, to make it easier on him. While we worked, the SS and capos [note: Kapos were concentration camp inmates appointed by the SS to be in charge of work gangs] beat us. When we'd be scurrying by the SS, sometimes an SS soldier would snatch someone's cap from his head, throw it behind him and say, 'Get the cap!' And when someone set out to fetch it, they'd shoot him for attempting to escape. Then when in Germany an attempted assassination of Hitler took place in a Munich beer hall on November 8th, 1939, we were all designated ‘sympathizers of the perpetrators’ and didn't receive anything to eat for three days.

There I also met Father Plojhar. Together with fourteen Czechoslovak Jews from the camp, he brought us a few hot potatoes and hot water with molasses at night, which he passed under the fence and for which they had to bribe the cook. While I don't know what Mr. Plojhar did as a minister, in the camp he was very courageous and helped us a lot. It's just a shame that no one mentions this. I don't mean his communist orientation but his bravery and humanity, which he showed in the camp.

My father died of hunger on November 20th, 1939. His last words, when my friends carried me to him – at the time I had frostbitten feet – were for me to help my mother and protect my brothers. This I promised him. It was horribly painful for me, and even now I can't hold back the tears when I think back on it.

After my father's death, I once again found luck in the form of a good and brave person. The chief of the hospital in Buchenwald was a locksmith and an exceptional young communist, Walter Krämer. In 1933 they had thrown him in jail as a communist; there he learned to do surgery. He was an excellent surgeon and gradually worked his way up from nurse in prison hospitals to the position of chief of the hospital in Buchenwald, where he arrived in 1937. Krämer convinced the SS that even as chief of the hospital he couldn't guarantee that the infections from our camp wouldn’t make their way via the groundwater into their camp. God only knows why they didn't shoot us all back then. Out of three thousand and eight hundred prisoners, around three hundred of us remained. I was emaciated, just skin and bones, bugged-out eyes. At the time, with my height of one hundred and seventy-five centimeters, I weighed only thirty kilograms. I couldn't lift my feet or get up on a chair. Our clothing was in tatters, only the shoes had lasted, but they were leaky. We all had frostbite.

One day Walter Krämer arrived with nurses and took care of what they could.They took me and some others, because we were close to death, out with the corpses on hearses.They hid us in this shed that belonged to the hospital because in the hospital the SS would have recognized that we were from the camp. There they nursed us and even operated on some of us, and they gave us more food than in the camp. I was treated there for about ten days, and then, because the camp was closed down, they put us into normal blockhouses that had been freed up for us. There were about two of them, and for us they became an earthly paradise. We were dressed, deloused, and bathed. Each one of us got two blankets, a towel, a pillow, his own cabinet, and leather boots, basically everything that we had only dreamed of in the camp. We were in quarantine for six weeks, and then they began to assign us to work.

I worked in the first commando in the garden, where we had to dig out rocks and carry them to wagons that then carted them away to the transport group. We pulled huge wagons on an uneven surface. We pulled on cables in such a fashion that twenty people pulled a cable on one side and twenty on the other. We had to trot along due to the uneven terrain so that we could keep the wagons in motion. That's what we carted out of the garden. Into the garden we then carted wood, trees, cement, lime, sand, and bricks.

With the help of one friend, I got an 'apprenticeship' as a bricklayer with one master bricklayer, who, due to a labor shortage, was teaching young Jews. He found a house for us that was heated, and thanks to him we survived another winter. We learned how to prepare malt and other bricklaying procedures. When we were at least a little educated, he looked for work for us. We worked, for example, in a kitchen, where we repaired chimneys and potato cellars. In exchange, we'd get pots of potatoes and bread. Then I got to building barracks, crematoria, canteens, and other buildings.

In Buchenwald, I went through my first selection. I remember mainly that here Krämer saved the life of Franz Lehar's librettist, that is, Bedrich Löhner, who was born in Usti nad Orlici, spoke perfect Czech, and before the war collaborated with our performing artists. There were about five hundred Jewish prisoners present at that selection. When Krämer got to Bedrich Löhner, the officer that was accompanying him said, 'Mr. Lagerarzt [the camp doctor], that's the person that wrote 'Land of Smiles.' Shall we let him keep smiling?' And Krämer was very surprised, he looked at him for a while and then with a nod of his head saved his life for another four years. Löhner in the end died in Auschwitz.

In the quarry I had also already met the capo, Vogl. He belonged to a group of prisoners that had been convicted of theft, murder, and such. Vogl was from Hamburg. He had a position of power in the camp. He was involved in the cigarette black market with the SS, so he was also quite wealthy. He was known throughout the whole camp for his love affairs, especially with young male Polish prisoners. One day after work I ran into him in the shower. Most likely because he was very attracted to me, he wrote down my number and found out which block I slept in. He also came there one day to have a look at where exactly I slept, and he promised me that he'd come to visit me in the night. I was afraid, both of his visit and of the fact that someone could find out about it because that could cost me my life. For about three days I didn't sleep at night at all.

One night I saw someone crawling in through the window on the ground floor.It was clear to me who it was because the prisoners were forbidden to be out and about at night. Vogl crawled in through the window, and at that moment I began to shout 'mother', as if in my sleep, which woke everyone up, and they tried to stop me so that they could sleep. At that point, he had to disappear so that no one would discover him. This scene repeated itself about three times, and then Vogl stopped coming. But I was so rattled by it that at night when someone was just going to the bathroom and tapped my bed along the way, I also started shouting.

At this point, I'd like to mention punishment. The specialty of the SS in all camps that I passed through was punishment for nothing. During that time it didn't miss me either. Once they punished me by tying my arms behind my back, and behind the camp they hung me by those arms on beech trees that stood there. Of course, my arms were immediately dislocated. After I returned to the camp I could neither eat nor wash, and if I hadn't had good friends that took care of me in this situation, I wouldn't be here today. Recovery took about two months.

When I was in the bricklaying gang, I was punished a second time. This time they led me off to the gate, where there was this table with a recess in it. They tied my hands and feet, pulled down my pants and the SS arrived, who gave me twenty-five lashes on my buttocks with a bullwhip. Everyone that was beaten in this manner had to count each blow aloud, and whoever wasn't capable of this due to the pain had his punishment increased. Most people then died of infection. To top it all off, after the punishment was meted out, we had to thank them for it. That was perhaps even worse than the punishment itself. Once again, Krämer helped me. I was admitted to the hospital because I had a fever of almost forty degrees Celsius, and he took care of me.

During the war, I learned from my fellow prisoners about that man's fate. Wlter Krämer knew too much about Nazi practices. That's why they wanted him and his successors to sign a confirmation that German and Russian officers in the camp had died of tuberculosis. But when he signed it, they sent him to Poznan to a subsidiary workplace, where they mined gravel. There they shot him with a rifle.

Five years ago I and some friends managed to have Krämer designated as Righteous Among the Nations.Only about four hundred Germans have received this distinction. He's buried in Ziged, where I used to go to give lectures about the Holocaust. There I found out that he's known among the Germans as the 'doctor from Buchenwald'. Whenever I go there, I light a candle on his grave, and at my lectures, on TV and the radio, they always ask me about Krämer. He was one of the most righteous and self-sacrificing people I've ever met.”

MOZES KATZ

Khust, Ukraine
Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya
Date of interview: October 2003

Mozes Katz in Khust, 1943.

Read Mozes Katz's biography here
Click here to see his family pictures

Born in 1926 in Korolevo, Czechoslovakia, Mozes was the first of seven children. His father was a wagon driver, and his family owned a wagon and horses. His mother made and sold kosher dairy products. They were a religious family. The first time Mozes experienced anti-semitism was in 1939, when Hungarians began occupying Subcarpathia. His father was taken to a Hungarian labor battalion in early 1941. In April 1944, all remaining Jewish residents of Korolevo were taken to the ghetto in Iza, a nearby town. His grandfather died in the ghetto. After three weeks Mozes and the rest of his family were deported to Auschwitz. In January 1945, inmates began to be evacuated from Auschwitz in advance of the approaching Soviet Army. Mozes remembers the horrific eight-day journey to Buchenwald, during which they received no food. There he was liberated by the U.S. Army. After recovering, he decided at the last moment against going to America, choosing instead to return home to Subcarpathia. Of the seven children of his family, only Mozes and one sister survived, along with their father. Their home had been destroyed, and Mozes' father died in January 1946. After returning to Korolevo, Mozes remained religious. He was recruited for mandatory military service in the Soviet Army in October 1947, where he served in a construction battalion. After completing his service, he worked as a driver until his retirement in 1986. He married Vera Boldur in 1954, who gradually converted to Judaism after marrying him. They had two sons. Mozes never joined the Komosol or Party and retains a strictly religious lifestyle.

"Our trip to Buchenwald lasted eight days, and for these eight days, we didn't get any food. Sometimes, when there were people on the roads that our train passed, they saw who was on the train and threw us bread. Whoever caught a piece tried to bite on it before the others took it away. We put the dead in a corner, and when the train stopped at stations the guards took the deceased to another carriage. There were approximately twenty to twenty-five survivors in our carriage when the train arrived at Buchenwald.

When we arrived our guards were so exhausted that they didn't even hurry us. The Buchenwald camp was on a hill, and we dragged ourselves up the hill. I remember that my cousin Mendel found a piece of dry bread on the way to the camp. When we came to the

bathroom, he dipped it in hot water and put it in his mouth. We were given new clothing in the bathroom. We didn't have any lice, although we hadn't washed ourselves for a week.

Then we went to a barrack. We didn't get any dinner. They brought junk coffee in a big wooden barrel with no sugar. We were hungry and drank this coffee to fill up our stomachs. Before going to sleep we received tin badges with numbers on them. We were told that we were to come to the canteen with these badges to get one meal per day. We slept on plank beds with nothing, not even straw, on them.

When the lights were turned off we could hear some inmates crying: the stronger ones were taking away badges from the weaker ones to get two meals instead of one. The three of us took turns sleeping to watch our badges.

We were lucky again. It's good luck that always matters. Since we were short we were taken to a barrack for young people. There were two barracks for children over five years of age and teenagers. There were two old men, about seventy years of age, watching them. Nobody tried to get our badges or hurt us otherwise in this barrack.

We didn't go to work. We stayed on our plank beds and went to eat at the canteen once a day. Our meal consisted of a bowl of thin soup and a slice of bread. We had to eat our bread at once or hide it well because hungry inmates were waiting in the yard to snatch out this bread and eat it.

The American front was approaching. Every day English bombers bombed German barracks at the bottom of a hill in the woods. They didn't drop bombs on our barracks, but we left our barracks and stayed outside during air raids. In case a bomb hit a barrack there was no chance to escape while in the open space we had a hope to survive.

Every day German wardens ordered a group of stronger inmates with rubber hose sticks to encircle two barracks and chase their inmates outside the gate on top of the hill. They didn't let them back. This was scary since those people were left without even their miserable bowl of soup or slice of bread per day and had nothing ahead of them but to die of hunger or bombs.

Then the day of April 11th, 1945 came. On this day a group with rubber sticks encircled our barrack and began to chase us to the gate. We couldn't go back to the barrack in fear of rubber sticks, but we didn't want to go forward knowing that we would not be allowed to come back. A German officer sitting by the gate was watching the scene. We sat nearby hoping that they wouldn't dare to beat us in his proximity. Then an air raid began. They closed the gate and we returned to our barrack.

At night we heard shooting and explosions. The front was very near. In the morning there was silence in the camp. We ran out of the barrack.There was not a single German or guard on the towers. We climbed onto the roof of the barrack to see what was happening around. We saw American tanks near Buchenwald. Someone found gauntlets and cutting pliers with insulation

on handles to cut the powered wire fence. We ran out of the camp in the direction of the tanks.

The Americans came to the camp. At this time the German commandment of concentration camps in Weimar was dictating an order on the phone to encircle the camp, shoot all prisoners, and retreat. An American officer picked the receiver, laughed, and repeated this order in English. One of the prisoners said it in Yiddish. Our luck was with us again this time.

It didn't occur to our liberators that they shouldn't give starved people a lot of food to eat at once. They cooked big bowls of delicious stewed meat, and hungry people pounced on this food. Many of them died. It was too much for them to handle. We survived though."

LASZLO NUSSBAUM

Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Interviewer: Molnar Ildiko
Date of interview: December 2001

Laszlo Nussbaum and his future wife, Silvia Brull, in Cluj Napoca, 1947.

Click here to read Laszlo Nussbaum's biography
Click here to see his family pictures

Laszlo grew up in Torda and later in Kolozsvar. He had one younger brother and fondly remembers a happy childhood. In 1940, his family was forced to move to the ghetto in Kolozsvar, which was in an old brick factory. From there, they were all deported to Auschwitz, where he, his brother, and his father were separated from their mother. That was the last time they ever saw her. His father died two months before the camp's liberation. While in Auschwitz, Laszlo did everything possible to protect his younger brother.However, he was murdered in the gas chambers in October 1944. Laszlo was sent to Buchenwald after a few months, where he experienced the self-liberation of the camp and the subsequent arrival of the U.S. Army. He was just sixteen years old. He decided to return to Kolozsvar, where he found no family or home left. Alone, he finished high school and began studying mathematics and economics at university. He was working as a librarian when he met his wife, Silvia Brull, who helped him overcome the trauma of losing his family. They married in 1952 and had one son. He remains committed to the Jewish lifestyle and community of his town.

"As far as I know, Buchenwald was the only self-liberating '*Lager'*. It was one of those camps where there were mostly political prisoners. The internal management was in the hands of the political prisoners. The Germans organized it in such a way that they charged the prisoners with different responsibilities. Along with their function, they got certain advantages – for example, in terms of food. The office administration was done by prisoners as well: who had died, who was going with the next transport. They mostly knew [among the ordinary prisoners] that this one was a communist, that one was a leftist.

These big camps were rather transit prisons. If the factories needed manpower then they took a few hundred people from here to work. They knew which workplaces were better and which were worse. The Germans selected people for different places in vain. They could change the registry sheet as well as the people. I didn't have connections with them, but they must have thought: 'This is a youngster; let's put him in a better place.' They primarily saved

those whom they knew were communist, leftist, or antifascist, as well as the children. They saved me because I was a child. They transferred me to a place where the work was easier. If they had put me into a quarry, I would not have survived.

When I arrived at the labor camp [Tröglitz] where they put me, a guy appeared and told me, whispering: 'Tell them you're a lathe operator!' 'But I'm not competent,' I said. He came close to me again and repeated: 'Tell them you're a lathe operator!' When I got there and they asked me, I said I was a lathe operator's apprentice, though I didn't even know what a lathe looked like. They did this because the lathe operators were in a place which they heated in winter somewhat.It wasn't zero degrees but three or four degrees, and the other places were totally unheated. But they didn't heat it for us – it was the working process that demanded the heating.

There was an international underground organization which was able to obtain a few weapons. The essence of the self-liberation is as follows: We could not know whether the 'Lager' was laid with mines and whether the Germans would blow it up, and us along with it, at the last minute, and if so, when this might be. The self-liberation was based on surprise: that the Germans were shot from the inside, from the camp. We had to calculate how long we could hold the 'Lager' and, above all, the prisoners. Some prisoners were generals with previous war experience, and they worked out the plan of the campaign.

On April 11th, when early in the morning the Germans shouted to go out to '*Appell*' [German for 'roll call'], these people came into the room: 'Nobody is going out! You stay here!' The Germans shouted '*Appell*!' in vain. If the senior man in the room said to stay there, then everybody would stay. Soon after that, I heard the first shot. They were shooting at the SS soldiers in the watchtower. We resisted from 11 AM until about half-past 1, when the first American tanks rolled in. So they [the inside liberators] had only to calculate how long we could resist until the real liberators, the Americans, came in.

There was no question of leaving the camp and walking around on the front line before the capitulation, which meant that after the liberation we remained in the '*Lager'*, of course under different circumstances. They gave us food in the kitchen, and I have to say that the Americans made quite a big blunder, though I don't believe it was intentional. They gave us fatty soup, I tasted it, and I felt that I mustn't eat it. Then I saw with my own eyes that many people died within a couple of days at the toilet with cramps.

They [the Americans] kept us in the camp because we could not disperse. There were three categories: those who wanted to go home; skeptics who said they'd go anywhere but ‘back there’; and another part who wanted to go nowhere except to Israel, then Palestine. Those who wanted to go west could go earlier. Young people were actually received by any country. A sixteen-year-old liberated from the camp could go everywhere from Sweden to America.”

Film: LASZLO NUSSBAUM – EUROPE WITHOUT BORDERS

Watch the film here

Click here to read Laszlo Nussbaum's biography

Click here to see his family pictures

"A remarkable story of changing borders and stubborn optimism. Heinrich Nussbaum lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had four sons who fought in the First World War. The empire collapsed and Europe was divided, but Heinrich didn't believe in borders and sent his sons to universities all over Europe: Sandor studied economics in Prague, Joseph became a doctor in Berlin, Laszlo received his degree in philosophy in Paris, and Jeno, Laszlo's father, studied mathematics in Florence.

When war came, Sandor was killed in a Hungarian forced labor brigade, Laszlo was hidden by a family in Paris, Jeno was murdered in Buchenwald, and Joseph, the doctor, fled to America, joined the U.S. Army and entered Germany as a medic.

Our story belongs to Jeno's son Laszlo, who tells us that he lost his grandfather's optimism in the Buchenwald concentration camp and that it took until the Romanian revolution of 1989 to get it back."

Photograph: LASZLO NUSSBAUM IN BUCHENWALD

Photo taken in Buchenwald, 1945.

Laszlo Nussbaum with fellow former-inmates after the liberation of Buchenwald, 1945.

Click here to read Laszlo Nussbaum's biography

Click here to see his family pictures

"I got this picture completely by chance, after many decades. It was taken in 1945 in Buchenwald. We gathered in the camp at the time of the liberation and an American soldier was taking pictures. He took a picture of us, among others. And after many decades somebody on a visit to the United States saw this picture. They recognized somebody, but not me, and asked to have it photocopied. The one who was recognized knew the others and that's how I got it, too. I'm the outermost on the right. They told me afterward: 'It's typical that you wore a tie, even with your striped uniform.'"

RUZENA DEUTSCHOVA
Galanta, Slovakia
Interviewer: Martin Korcok
Date of interview: September 2004

Ruzena Deutschova in Galanta, 1946.

Read Ruzena Deutschova's biography here
Click here to see her family pictures

Ruzena Deutschova was born in 1927 in Dombo as one of eight siblings. Her father was a tailor and her mother a housewife.They were a strictly Orthodox family. When Hungary began occupying Romania in 1938, their family was expelled from their village because of their Jewish faith, and they moved to Galanta. In 1944, when Ruzena was just seventeen, she and her family were deported to Auschwitz. Her whole family was murdered. From Auschwitz, she was sent to a sub-camp of Buchenwald, Allendorf, from where she fled after the SS abandoned the camp in April 1945. She returned to Galanta with friends from the camp. Of her nine original family members, only three returned. She married Hermann Deutsch in Prague in 1947, and together they had three children. Ruzena worked as a general manager until her retirement. She considers herself a Hungarian citizen andis proud of her Jewish faith and heritage.

"The next day they gave us water to bathe. We got clothes and headed towards Allendorf [a labor camp in the Buchenwald concentration camp system]. We traveled for three days, and they bombed Dresden horribly. They let us out there, so we could do a little 'business', at least. One German who happened to be passing, asked me, naturally in German:'What are you? A boy or a girl?' I said girl. He shook his head and said, '*Gott*, how you look!' So you can't say that every German was rotten.

From June to the middle of August, I was in Auschwitz. When we ended up in Allendorf, we laid down on the ground and kissed it. Little flowers were growing in the camp. Everybody got one bunk, and the beds were three high. We got a little blanket, a sack of hay. It wasn't like this in Auschwitz, where we had to sleep sitting on the ground. We couldn't have even laid down. In Allendorf, life was more humane. There were a thousand of us. Seven hundred Hungarians from Hungary, there were about three hundred of us from 'Felvidek' ['*oberland*' in German – literally 'the upperlands'; today, an area in Slovakia on the Hungarian border that was annexed to the First Czechoslovakian Republic by the Trianon Treaty at Versailles, then re-annexed by Hungary in 1938 by the First Vienna Decision.] I always signed up to work everywhere, and I ended up in the kitchen. Of course, my knowledge of German helped me. I worked in the kitchen until the end of our time in the *lager*.

One supervisor woman, Margaret, was especially cruel. We named her ‘guinea fowl’ [Perlhuhn]. If she approached, we said ‘guinea fowl is coming’ because we couldn’t say ‘Margaret is coming’. Once she heard it, and they told her what the word meant. She beat us with a rubber club and her hands, then she locked us in the cellar for I don’t know how many days. Of course, we got no food. They really beat me on two occasions there.

I didn’t have to work in the munitions factory. The factory was four or five kilometers [two to three miles] from our quarters. I thought that everything was underground since the big trees covered everything.They nearly barricaded the camp along with the factory. I was in the factory one time when my sister got sick. I saw what work they did there. In the Allendorf shell factory, they filled bombs. The work was very difficult. They left in the morning and got a half-liter of milk. They drilled out the bombs and put in the wicks and the detonator. It looks like the work was very detrimental to your health, that’s why they gave you milk, too. We stayed in Allendorf until March. Allendorf belonged to Buchenwald. At the end of March, they evacuated us. We marched day and night, for I don’t know how many days. The Germans were with us, but they didn’t shoot us. They were going to Berlin, we didn’t know where we were going. They locked us in a pen where there were sheep grazing. They wanted to burn us up with the pen. The SS who were with us in the camp didn’t do this. Adolf Hupka was his name, he didn’t burn us up. He was a decent person. Whatever he could, he did for us. He was a decent person. The female supervisors in the camp were very horrible. But he was decent, very decent. He said to us, ‘Tomorrow you will be free, but I don’t know what will happen to us.’ The next day we started off again, and they took the death-head insignia off their caps and coats. Then we spread out in a forest, I think it was the Black Forest.

We just kept fleeing.”

LUCIA HEILMAN

Vienna, Austria
Interviewer: Tanja Eckstein
Date of interview: September 2012

Lucia Heilman in Vienna, 1946.

Read Lucia Heilman's biography here (only available in German)
Click here to see her family pictures

Lucia Heilman's maternal grandfather, Josef Treister, was born in Debina (modern-day Ukraine) in 1873. Cossacks invaded their town at the outbreak of World War I in 1914, and Josef fled with his family to Vienna. Lucia grew up there, living with her mother and grandfather, with whom she had a very close relationship. She was just a child when her beloved grandfather was deported to Buchenwald in 1938 and murdered in 1939.

"In 1938, my grandfather was still living in Pappenheimgasse. Then Hitler said you have to take your parents in, so my grandfather lived with us again.

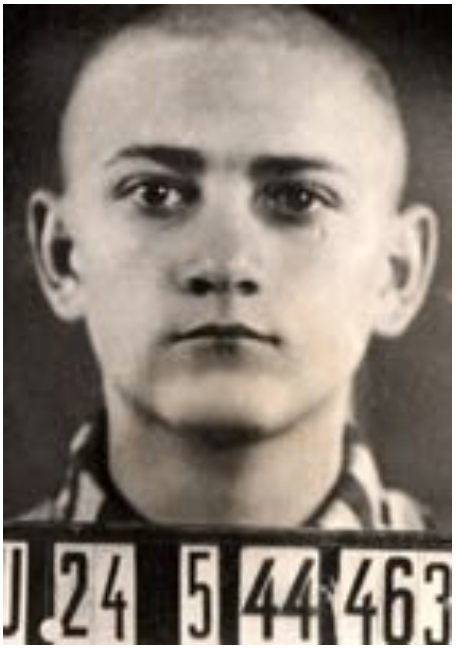
I still remember exactly how the SS took my grandfather from Berggasse to Buchenwald [Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, near the city of Weimar]. That was a terrible experience. SS men came to the door of our flat, dressed in black, it was evening, but you could still see into the yard. My grandfather suddenly seemed so very old to me. He had a thick winter coat on, a small suitcase in his hand, and to the left and right, the SS men marched with him through the courtyard. I had spent my whole life with this grandfather. He was closer to me than any other person because he was always with me. He was my supervisor, and he was my playmate. Everyone, including me, knew we would never, never see him again.

My grandfather was interned in the Prater, in the football stadium, with other men.Only men were taken away at that time. My mother was told that she could bring him something to wear. What she was allowed to bring was prescribed. We lined up at the stadium in a small suitcase with his name on it to hand in the clothes. While we stood there in line, we were not allowed to speak or move. Anyone who did not comply was pushed and beaten by the stewards, who were also SS men. It was terrible! Those are terrible experiences for a child, when you see your own mother being beaten by others, when you are helplessly at the mercy of other people. We left the little suitcase for grandfather, and a little later people were transported from the stadium to the Buchenwald concentration camp. My mother and I knew

that the people would be murdered, and I would argue that all the other Viennese also suspected this and hoped that these people who were being taken away would never come back. Maybe they didn't know it right at the beginning, but from 1941, when the transports began, everyone knew that they were going to their deaths. The so-called Aryans stole everything from the deportees, of course, they didn't want them to ever come back. And then came the telegram with my grandfather's obituary. He died on October 23rd, 1939 in Buchenwald concentration camp.”

STEPAN NEUMAN

Uzhgorod, Ukraine
Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya
Date of interview: October 2003



Frank Neuman, the brother of Stepan Neuman, in Buchenwald, 1944.

Read Stepan Neuman's biography here
Click here to see his family pictures

Stepan Neuman's brother, Frank, was imprisoned in Buchenwald from 1944 to 1945.

"I was so happy when my brother returned home in July 1945. In May 1944 he was sent to Buchenwald from Auschwitz. I have a photo of my brother from the file of prisoner #463, Jew Ferenc Neuman, dated May 24th, 1944.Frantisek's only fault was that he was a Jew.He had done nothing wrong. Before he was taken to the ghetto in Uzhgorod, and then to the concentration camp, Frantisek was a schoolboy, a last-year student of the grammar school. In the last days of his imprisonment in Buchenwald, he could only stay in his bed. The dying young men were put on the upper-tier beds, and they were not able to get up to even go to the toilet.

My brother was rescued by the American troops that liberated the camp. He was taken to an American hospital where he stayed for almost two months. Frantisek had severe dystrophy, and the doctors were afraid he was going to die, but he was young and overcame the disease. He was hoping to find somebody at home and refused to go elsewhere. So we met. My brother told me very little about his imprisonment in the camp. He wanted to forget it."