Rudy Herz, Part 2

Interviewer: What happened when you got off the train?

Herz: Well, first, before we -- when we approached Auschwitz, we saw our first striped uniform working in the field, women working in the field in these zebra suits that you probably are familiar with from pictures. And we thought, Well, where there are vegetable fields, there is surely work for us because we are from a small community, and we knew. When we arrived, it was 4:00 in the afternoon. The doors were yanked open, and the first thing we heard, *“Raus, raus,”* which means, “out.” “As soon as you can, out!” And everybody said, “Well, how about our belongings?” And they said, “Your belongings, you leave there. Your belongings, you leave there.” My father asked, “Well, what can we take with us?” And I remember the one Jewish, Polish-Jewish trusty prisoner said, *“Die Beytsim.”* Translated means “your testicles,” meaning that, if you get out alive, you will be lucky. So we grabbed what little we could quickly. It was some foodstuffs, and all of the family was assembled outside. This was not yet the selection that other transport come through, Men to the right, women to the left, with people beaten apart with sticks. This did not happen in our case. We were assembled in long rows, and we were marched between troops of the SS, special death head division. We were marched to the *Lagerstrasse,* which was a broad, broad -- avenue is perhaps wrong to say. It was a broad expanse running between camps, and that is where we first got a taste of what we were in. We knew we had arrived in Birkenau, which is a valley of the birch trees, a euphemism that the Germans were fond of using for “death camps.”

Our experience was that we were marched up and down this street for four or five hours between the pillars of barbed wire with the huge sign, *Todesgefar,* which means “extreme danger,” electrical wires, and we saw the insulators along the wires, along which the wires were strung. We saw the guard towers up high above us, from each end to the other end. We could see their machine guns, and we did not need any more convictions of what was going to await us. We did not know that we were in a death camp. Even then, and I will say this much, you have a poem or saying in the United States or in English literature, “Hope springs eternal.” I do not know who said it or whether it was a poet, but at that time, it was the nadir, the low point, of our lives. We were marched back and forth and back and forth, and I would say the family, we were separated, we met each other, we were separated, we met each other again. We met other people that we knew. They just kept us in motion, and one older woman that I was walking next to said in [indistinct]. She was in hearing of a German SS -- when I say SS, it means the death head brigade members -- in the hearing of the death head, “God, where are you?” He answered, “There is no God. He was drafted in the German army, and he’s obeying orders.” So he thought that was very cute and very funny. I found it exceedingly telling, so to speak.

As the evening grew on and it went towards 1:00 in the morning, we were more desperate and more desperate, and you could hear more and more cries for sustenance. And we were looking up. It was a perfectly clear, starry sky, no moon, and I was reminded of one thing, and you have heard it many, many times, “The Ode to Joy,” and in there, it says, *“Brüder, über’m Sternenzelt/Muß ein lieber Vater Wohnen.”* “Brethren, above the starry skies/There must be a loving father.” And I thought this was the greatest travesty that I have ever heard to come from the pen of a German poet. And I am sorry to say, after we cried to the Lord for deliverance, we mentioned everything we could, including me. It says -- *De profundis* is a old Psalm. It says “From the depth”...

Interviewer: Take your time.

Herz: We were not delivered. It got worse. So -- excuse me. I don’t know whether it means anything. “Lift your eyes to the mountain from where”... Even now, it affects me. I’ll just have to cut this short a little bit, that segment of it.

Finally, they had set up some corridors or corrals, chutes. “Chute” is the good word for it. They set up some corrals, mounted, or manned. Manned is a better word. Forget about the word “mounted.” Manned by the SS, and the corrals consisted of a deep box, and everybody was relieved of whatever valuables we have. Women, men were forced to strip off their wedding rings, their prized possessions, mementos, lockets of relatives no longer there. Whatever we had, we lost at that moment. Those who did not wish to give it up willingly found out what German justice, or what German thoroughness was like. Since very many people had arrived there on crutches and many Germans had walking sticks -- the SS and the German trusty prisoners or Jewish trusty prisoners all had walking sticks -- those who did not give up willingly or fast were simply beaten over the back, over the head, no matter what. We gave up everything. As a 16 year old, what did I -- I had a slide rule that was given to me, a small slide rule. I gave it up. I had nothing more to give. I had no rings, no jewelry, no watch. So as a sign of -- how shall I say -- that he was displeasured, a sign of displeasure, I got a few cuts with his walking stick and told to move on to the other group.

Well, there, we were then separated in male and female. Men and women were walked separately to what they call B *Lage,* the B Camp of Auschwitz. There was A Camp, which was for Russian prisoners at that time. C Camp was for something else; I think it was Gypsies that were just as -- looked on as disfavorably, even more so, perhaps, as the Jews are. There wasn’t anything lower than Jews anyhow. So we went, and we were assigned a barracks, and in the barracks, it was the same thing over again. The barracks elders made us walk, again, by a crate, and if we had not given up everything, we were fairly well mistreated to give up whatever we may have hidden from the SS, and the only thing that I had at that time that they wanted was, I had a leather jacket, and I told my father later on that I regretted having to give that jacket. And he said something that I’ve never forgotten. My mother, too, was at that time with us. We still were able to communicate. He says, “Child, if we ever get out of here, I’ll buy you ten of these.”

Well, I don’t know what else to say -- oh. We were then assigned to the bunks. The bunks were in three tiers: lower, middle, and upper. My brothers and my father were assigned an upper bunk. It had straw ticking. I am not sure whether you know -- would you know what straw ticking is?

Interviewer: Yes, yes, I do.

Herz: It was just burlap filled with straw. The bolster was burlap filled with straw. And we had not eaten at that time, and we were not to get anything to eat. And then next morning, a routine began in earnest. And I do not know whether you want to ask me anything more.

Interviewer: Yes.

Herz: Go ahead.

Interviewer: Please continue on about the routine now. What was daily life like?

Herz: The routine was that we had caps, or we had hats. Most of us had some sort of a covering for our heads, and the first thing we knew that the civilization had come to an end was that the barracks eldest took his stick and lifted off hat of everyone that came in there, the hat of everyone that came in there. There was a piece of scalp went along with it, it made no difference. Then we saw a big sign, *“Mützen ab im block,”* which meant, “Hats off in the barracks.” The barracks was the point where food was distributed and where things went on. In the morning, we were issued -- we had still got a few cups or spoons or whatever it was -- two slices of what the Germans called *Kommissbrot,* which means “military bread,” which was a mixture of wheat, rye, and barley perhaps. It was a very compact bread. Each one got two slices of bread, sometimes a pat of margarine, sometimes a little bit of marmalade. The coffee was, the coffee was toasted acorns ground up; tasted terrible. And at lunch, for lunch, or the midday meal, a soup with maybe a little bit of meat. Potatoes was the main thing, and beets that you normally feed the cattle here. So this was our midday meal, and we started to get -- we were already hungry in Terezin because we did not get enough to eat. In Auschwitz it was worse. We were beginning to starve. In the evening, another slice of bread and some coffee; no marmalade, no butter, no nothing.

In between -- at the beginning, before we had coffee in the morning, we had then later on what the Germans called *Appell stehen,* which means -- *Appell* means “counting,” the counting of the prisoners. We were arranged in groups of five, with small distances between us. The SS trooper would come by and start counting, one, two, three, four, and five, then multiply it by five. If he miscounted, he went over it again, but meanwhile, we had stood out there already two hours because the Blockalteste, the block eldest, and the German prisoners with their striped uniforms -- we did not have striped uniforms. The German prisoners were beating us; well, not beating us at that time yet, but they’re getting us into line, rough shoving, punching, just to get us in line. So we are standing there an hour, two hours, and I kept wondering why none of us would overpower this lone guard who had just a small pistol. But what could we have done? There were guard posts on either end, high tension wires between with barbed wires that curved inward towards us, and we were as vulnerable as anything. We could have been killed. They didn’t need but simply to spray the entire place with machine gunfire, and they would have gotten everyone in there. So apparently, also, there was no organization. There was no underground organizations that said, Let’s get together on this and let’s see how we can do this.” It is, I’m sure that most of the Americans have seen the Stalag series where they always overcome the Germans, but they actually did not. None of their schemes actually succeeded for very long, and I am sure that in reading -- in viewing the television series -- what is it called again?

Interviewer: “Hogan’s Heroes”? Is that the one?

Herz: No, no. Yes, that I meant where they always did well, but the other one about the Holocaust, Lanzmann, Claude Lanzmann. It was called “Holocaust,” wasn’t it?

Interviewer: “Shoah.”

Herz: “Shoah.” They showed that actually only one or two people escaped out of the millions of prisoners, Jewish prisoners or prisoners in Auschwitz, and it is a very small amount. So we tried and tried schemes to think of while in Auschwitz. None of us would have worked because only later on I saw why they would not have worked. They had what they called the *großen Postenketten* or the “grand military patrol.” In small holes in the ground, camouflaged SS were spaced 10 feet apart surrounding the entire camp, armed with machine pistols, with automatic rifles. Nobody would have come through. So we gave that up, and we determined, well, we’ll try and make -- try and survive. We did not yet know, and we did not know that Auschwitz was an extermination camp or that we possibly could be slated for extermination. The only thing that we did know was that there was always this sickly sweet smell and pallor in the air. We saw a crematorium belching smoke 24 hours a day. We saw Red Cross wagons ferrying back and forth, and only later we found out that they were carrying military personnel or cyanide canisters. We did not know that. Also we were not permitted that close to the entrance to the camp. So at any rate, all of a sudden, we were made acquainted with brutality, which we did not think --

a civilized nation like the Germans would either permit or have knowledge of or do. The first one was that at lunch, all of a sudden, a man was taken. An older man, maybe 65, 70 was taken and laid over the central heating portion, which was just a rough chimney about, I would say, two and a half foot high. He was laid over that, held down by the German *Kapo,* they called them, the barracks eldest and the work detail eldest, who were German criminals, and he received 15 cuts with a walking cane, and I have never forgotten the screams or the pleas for mercy or, later on, nothing anymore except the sounds that a dying animal would make. When they finally let him off, he could not stand, and two fellow prisoners were ordered to support him. And a cardboard sign was hung around his neck with a piece of string, and on it, it said, *“Ich habe brot gestohlen.”* “I stole bread. We saw this many, many times. The older man, who could be anybody’s grandfather, was totally destroyed. He was no longer a human being. Mucus -- snot, if you wish to call it, because that’s what we called it. Snot ran down his face. His eyes streamed with tears. He was whimpering.

At any rate, we were acquainted, all of a sudden, what a German concentration camp was like.

Interviewer: Did you have any contact with your family?

Herz: Yes. We saw each other. My mother’s hair was cut down. She had long hair. My mother was a woman at that time of 40; healthy, friendly. At any rate, we saw each other. My father, my brothers made the best we could of the situation. My younger brother, who is now in Rome, Italy, had secreted a work of a German poet. You may have known -- you probably will know him, Goethe. He had written a work, “Faust.” We read it twice. We read it three times. Whereas in Theresienstadt we had some sort of a cultural life -- we tried to make Jewish culture our -- there was a Zionist movement in -- how do we call it -- in Theresienstadt.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Herz: In Auschwitz, there was nothing. It was the end, the end of everything. We read the book. We memorized it. We quoted. We had a deck of cards that one of us had. We played card games because there wasn’t anything else we could do. My brother, out of sheer boredom, got himself a job laying, laying a stone *Lagestraße,* a cobblestone Lagestraße. It gave him a half of portion of food more. The work was excruciating. My mother found that the -- nothing grew in Auschwitz, by the way. There was not a bird. There was not a living -- no grass or something. There was a drainage canal going through our B camp, and daily details of prisoners from other camps came and laid sod. And my mother checked the sod over. We were desperate for food, and she found, from living in our small village, that there were items that we could eat out of there, and she gathered them, and whenever we could see them, we partook of them. But everybody was about as egotistical as -- there was no longer any sacrificing for anybody, even for family members. You couldn’t. There wasn’t enough to go around. A mother could not give of her portion for her starving child because there wasn’t that much. We were actually starving. We were dreaming of food. We were talking about food. We were -- in three months of not having enough to eat, or four months, we were actually at the end of our strength. And yet, we had hoped only that somehow, in 1944, the end of the war would be in sight. We were also, all of a sudden, cognizant of the fact that we could all be very easily killed down there by machine gunfire from the watchtowers.

And then, in the middle of July, I remember, news traveled through the camp. There was an upheaval in the German government, and we have now a new minister of the Interior. And we thought, Oh, something has happened. We were, neither in Theresienstadt nor in Auschwitz, able to obtain any news. Rumors by the hundred thousands; not one bit of hard news. I do not know when the landing -- the landing may have already been taken in Normandy in 1944. We were not aware of it. We were totally and hermetically sealed off from the rest of humanity. The upheaval was, of course, the assassination attempt on Hitler on the 20th of July, and our hopes were dashed in the next three days when we found out that measures would be more stringent than ever, and that the person who had been chosen to head the entire Interior Ministry in Germany under which all the camps were was Heinrich Himmler himself. I’m sure that you have heard of Heinrich Himmler. And from one plateau of hope, we were, again -- how shall I say -- dashed into an abyss of nearly dismal despair, and yet again, we were hoping that eventually we would be liberated. I had already -- I had visions that we were returned -- remember again that this is not a 66-year-old person, that it is a 16-year-old person saying this to you. I had visions that we would be hailed back in triumph to our respective places of where we came from and restored to all civilian honors and recompense or compensation for what we had suffered. We heard artillery fire in the distance, and we thought, Well, these were the Russians advancing. They may have well been. I do not know how far artillery fire, the detonations, carry. We heard only that the Russians were near Kraków. This, again, may have been a rumor. We were not able to verify it. Nobody could tell us. So that was Auschwitz. Brutality, yes.

Oh, one more thing that I wish to say. What did people die of? Well, they died of hunger because they had come to the camps with already a weakened composition. The corpses, and that was my first -- Theresienstadt, I already knew -- the facts of life were abundantly clear -- that people died, and I knew that they were buried. But there, because there was no such niceties as a burial in a coffin, the people who had died were thrown, or “stacked” is perhaps a better word, at the very end of the barracks row. Underneath the watchtower, they were stacked like cordwood, naked, without dignity, as they had died, staring, unseeing, nobody to close their eyes, just like cordwood. Cordwood is 4 feet, as you remember, and that is how they were stacked, 4 feet high. Then, at the end -- every period I think they were lying there several hours -- I cannot remember. I was not anxious to explore this place of the dead. I did see it because I wanted to see it. But I would say every 24 hours, a cart came that had high sides. I know that because I saw it. They were simply hand and foot, tossed on there. Dignity of the dead? Nothing. And we then knew that they were taken to the crematoria to be incinerated. There is no way to euphemistically describe this. We had still, at that time, no knowledge of the advent of the gas station -- of the gas chambers and that people were killed or gassed in such numbers as they were. We only knew one more thing. The transport that preceded us had some people in it, and we talked about them to people that were in the B Lage. Well, they told us then they were moved on such-and-such a date, and they deliberately did not tell us, did not tell us, that their fate was the gas chamber. We were deceived by all of the people that were in the camp in any position to tell us. We were deceived. They were, perhaps, told by the SS, if anyone would ever talk about gas chambers and crematoria, that this would be their fate, and they knew the Germans meant it. That they had been German trustees for 15 or five or ten years meant absolutely nothing. If a German SS felt that a prisoner, no matter what, was acting against rules, regulation, whatever it was, he felt no compunction to pull out his gun or to assign him to a gas chamber immediately, there and then.

Interviewer: What were you doing in the camp?

Herz: Nothing.

Interviewer: Nothing?

>> Herz: Absolutely nothing. Waiting. Rumor. Talk where we had been. Talk where we were born. Talk of our experiences to others. We did not talk to the Czechoslovakians because we were not able to communicate with them. I did not know but a few short words of Czechoslovakian and some sentences. I did talk with the Dutch because I am from a neighborhood that borders the Netherlands, and our dialect was very close to what the Dutch speak as their national language. So with the Dutch, I could communicate. I made an effort to learn their language, so I knew about -- Westerbork, I believe, was the Dutch camp, and the term *onderduiken,* which means “dived under,” meaning that somebody would take them in and hide them, a la Anne Frank, Anne Frank. That was because the Dutch were a kinder people than the Germans. So we were waiting. That we were in pens did not occur to us. I must say this again and again. We had no inkling, no notion of what awaited us there. The only reason that I and my oldest brother got out is, a bombing raid on a factory in nearby Dresden which was manufacturing gasoline from bituminous coal. It had been badly damaged by Allied bombers, and all of a sudden, we were called out, my brother and I. He was 19. I was 18 -- I was 19. He was 20. We were still in good physical condition, and we were told that we were to be shipped off to a camp where we would do work in the German industry.

Interviewer: This was 1944?

Herz: 1944, August, probably. We did not have a calendar. It had to be August, somewhere around that. The beginning of August, let’s say. It was shortly after the assassination attempt. My brother and I were told to report to a barracks somewhat closer to the entrance. We were assigned two bunks, and we were told, You people are going. There will be a transport together of about 2,000 men. You are going to go to such-and-such a town, or to a town near Dresden where you will do work for the German war industry. We did not know what to believe at that time. We hoped that it was the right thing, as again, we had no thoughts of death chamber. The only thing that disturbed me was my mother came, sneaked into our barracks. It was strictly against the rule. Everybody was assigned to a barracks. After 9:00, nobody was to leave the barracks, under death penalty. My mother came and said...

She took leave of us.

We tried to figure out a way how to get together again after this. That’s about the best I can tell you, and I finally had -- she said, “Let me stay with you.” I said, “No. You know they don’t allow it. You’ll only get yourself into more difficulty. Please, go.” So...

She left. The next day, early in the morning -- we still had our civilian clothes. My brother and I were taken. We thought now that this was going to be our end. Finally it dawned on us that this might really be the end, that they were going to get rid of all the able-bodied people in order to have no resistance from the women and children and older people. But, no, we marched by the crematorium, and it was the first time I had seen the crematorium. There was no activity going on, except that the chimney was belching the blackest soot that I had ever seen. The stench was almost impossible to bear. We were taken to a low-lying barracks where we were told to undress completely. Now we thought that this was going to be the end. We kept our shoes on. They asked us -- they told us, “You may keep your shoes.” I had a small knife, and I don’t know what else I had. Some token that I had been given from a girl in Theresienstadt, I had hidden it in my shoes, but they had taken care of that. Our shoes were disinfected. Some Polish prisoner in a striped uniform was there. He had a basin, and we had to walk through this basin, and he took our shoes before we entered this shallow basin. He shook out the shoes and beat them together, and I could see that he was bringing up coins and valuables that people had tried to hide. We were given our shoes back.

Our next station was a barber. We were relieved of, or we were shorn of all of our body hair; completely bald. Our underarm hair, our pubic hair, everything was shorn off. Every body hair was totally shorn off, and we were given the striped uniform that I am sure you have seen many times. We had, on these striped uniforms, we had sewn on the numerals and the insignia that we had already seen in the camp, and we had been explained what it was. Black for German, professional criminals; green for other criminals that were not professionals but had just run afoul -- murderers or something like that that had been given penitentiary sentences; perverts. Everyone had a different insignia. I remember one group that I found later were the homosexual, the pink triangle. You may have heard of it. And then when I looked at -- oh, political prisoners. The elite of the camp -- the Kapos, the eldest, the block eldest and the work detail eldest -- had their low numerals like 642 with a red triangle. We knew that they had been in since 1934 or ’35. Our numbers were stenciled on there in black ink, preceded by a yellow triangle resting on its base and a red triangle superimposed to form a Star of David. My number was 85,501. My brother was the oldest brother, and he was the first, with the initials also. His number was 85,500.

We were loaded into cattle cars. We had nothing to sit on. We had lost a lot of weight, and we were sitting on our bare bones on our behind because that’s what we were told. The railroad cars were locked. As I had told you before, we had to march to the railroad siding, which was a different siding than what we arrived on, and that is where we saw the großen Postenketten, which was, whenever there was a transport arriving or a transport leaving, the guards were situated 8 to 10 feet apart from each other, or 10 to 15 feet -- I cannot recall now -- each one in a small hole in the ground. I do not know why they had the hole in the ground business, but that is where they were. Maybe they had a seat down in there where they could sit down and were just visible above the ground. So at any rate, we passed this, one after one after one, and they were all in camouflage units, and finally, we passed about 15 or 20 of these till we arrived at the wash barracks. So there we were in the railroad cars, and we were being transported. We could not see out because the railroad cars were totally dark. We had no tools to break the cars open. The planks were heavy, so we gave that up.

Well, finally we arrived. We did not know this, but the numbers that we were given were assigned to us by a concentration camp called Sachsenhausen Oranienburg. And the camp that we were in was called Schwarzheide. “Black heath” is the translation. It had been a labor camp for prisoners. The barracks were there. Everything was in pretty good order, and we had, again, the guard troops that accompanied us. We did not know this until we left the railroad train. They had Pullman accommodations right behind the locomotive. Apparently, there was no need to shoot past the railroad cars because there was no opening in there, no window, no nothing. It was just totally enclosed cars. So we saw then the Pullman cars, and we were driven to an assembly place and arranged in the ordinary five in groups and marched to the camp from the railroad siding, which was about 4 or 5 miles distance. We knew that we were in Germany because some of the inscriptions were in German. We finally arrived at that. There were no electric barbed wire fences this time, but there were the barbed wire fences that were double, triple concertina wire with guard posts, nevertheless, in guard houses above.

We were given nothing to eat. We were given nothing to drink. We were fairly much dying from thirst till finally, the camp turned on the water faucet, and we nearly killed each other trying to get something to drink. We had not had anything to eat or to drink since the night before from Auschwitz. So there, we were assigned, then, barracks. I think my barracks was Barracks Number 2. I, of course, was with my brother, and we waited two days to be assigned bunks, and bunks were, again, with straw ticking. And cleaning of the barracks and work details, cleaning out the latrine. And then we were told the facts of life. This camp is such-and-such. When you must go at night to the latrine, you must announce yourself to the guard. What was the formula? “*Wache,”* which means “guard,” guard on duty, “one prisoner to the toilet.” And you had to wait a moment. He did not acknowledge it, but you moved in this -- the camp was floodlit at night. You moved then to the toilet, and I suppose they kept track of how many people were in there. But always this indignity of having to announce your destination, so to speak.