

Walter Feiger

Poland

I was born in Krakow, Poland, into a privileged family from the upper middle class. My father had a degree in chemistry from the University of Vienna, and my family owned a small factory that produced household products. In my early years I actually had two mothers: my maternal mother and our housekeeper, Marta, who was my governess. My mother was a socialite, so wherever Marta went I went with her. Marta was a devout Catholic, so on Sundays she took me with her to church. The Priest knew me by my first name, and every time I was there he put holy water on my head. Maybe that helped me to survive, because it's good to have two angels with you when you're in the death camps.

My early recollection is that the war between Poland and Germany officially began on September 1, 1939. I turned twelve on September 8, and my father had promised he'd be there for my birthday. He called to say he could not be there because he'd been called up into the army and had to report immediately. He served as an officer in the Austrian Army during World War I. That was the last time I had the opportunity to talk with my father, a few days before my twelfth birthday. Soon enough, the German Army entered the area we lived in.

We had moved out of Krakow, where I was born, and were living closer to the German border in a town called Katowice, Kattowitz in German. We lived in a nice apartment, and when German officers visited our place they decided they wanted to make their headquarters there. We were required to leave. All we could take was one suitcase apiece, with personal belongings, when we moved into a ghetto in a smaller town.

Katowice belonged to Germany before World War I, and when the German occupation started they said they were reunifying greater Germany. Jews were no longer allowed to live in that area. We went to live with relatives in Chrzanow, located between Katowice and Krakow, just 18 kilometers from Auschwitz. You could see the chimneys working hard later on, when the weather permitted.

Every male over the age of twelve had to work for the Germans in some capacity. In my family, that meant my father and brother had work. My brother was three years older than me. At the age of seventeen, the Germans sent him to a Forced Labor Camp. My mother, fearing that I might have to go next, took me to a work command that repaired highways and canals. She thought that if I worked there they might not send me to Germany. One day, as we returned from work, we were ordered to go to a local gymnasium. We had to undress there and stand in front of German officials and doctors. In the meantime, SS Storm Troopers circled the building.

Officially, you had to be seventeen years old to be sent to Germany, and I wasn't quite fifteen. But the doctor said I was strong enough and should be sent to a camp. We were marched to the railroad station, where my mother was able to give me a small suitcase with personal belongings and some German marks. She was originally born and raised in Cologne, Germany, and had some connections with the local German police department.

Eight months after I was sent to the camp, the town we lived in was liquidated. All the Jews in the ghetto there were required to gather at the marketplace, where a commission of German officers and doctors ordered them to undress. The women, children and senior citizens were automatically sent to Auschwitz and gassed. Younger, physically fit people were sent to labor camps. My mother was just thirty-eight years old and spoke perfect German, but she was sent to Auschwitz. Since I was just fifteen years old, my destiny would have likely been the same as my mother's. Once you got to Auschwitz, you didn't last very long.

At first, we were sent to a transitional camp in Poland. There, I went to see an official, a *Kapo*, to ask if I could be sent to the same camp in

Germany where my brother was.¹ I told him that if he could send me there I would give him all the German money I had. I got lucky: he was able to send me to Sakrau, which was in Kreis Oppeln, Germany. I can still see the expression on my brother's face when he saw me coming in. He would have never dreamed in his wildest imagination that his fifteen-year-old brother would show up at that camp.

The first thing we had to do in the camp was undress. The Germans checked our clothing and confiscated our money and jewelry. We had to wear a yellow star indicating we were Jews. Normally, in the ghetto, you just sewed it on your shirt. But in the camp we had to cut the shirt and sew the star on top to keep you from escaping. We then had to go to what they called *entlausung*.² They apparently thought we all had parasites and lice, so we had to get rid of them. They sprayed us with chemicals.

They shaved our heads, very close to a crew cut, and we had to get up early in the morning to assemble in front of the barracks for a headcount. If everyone was present, we were dismissed. Back in the barracks, we would wash up and get our bread rations. We received a half pound of bread a day and an imitation cup of coffee, called ersatz café, mostly chicory with no real coffee in it. That was supposed to last us until we returned to the camp.

We mostly performed highway work at that camp. The Germans needed good highways to efficiently move their military equipment and units. The work was very hard, but I was lucky that I'd learned how to use a shovel when I lived at home. I also spoke perfect German because that was my first language. My mother spoke to us in German. People with no experience like that soon became a joke to the Germans, and were beaten and insulted. Those people deteriorated much faster than the rest.

In the first labor camps there were no other nationalities or religions besides Jews. At the very beginning there were even a few females that would work in the kitchen. When we returned from work late in the evening, we would get a bowl of soup. That was our entire nourishment

¹ A *Kapo* was a prisoner assigned by the SS in Nazi prison camps to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks.

² Delousing.

for the day. Most of the time the soup had cabbage in it, or potato peels. There was never any meat in it, except on Hitler's birthday, when they gave us chowder. That was the only time we had something different.

Obviously, we deteriorated physically due to malnutrition. Every once in a while someone would just give up because he couldn't handle it. One of the worst possible punishments is starvation. If you have experienced starvation – I don't mean being hungry from one day to another, but real starvation – you know it's something that doesn't happen immediately. Your body deteriorates, and your mind preoccupies itself with one thing: food. You come to a point where you're demoralized, nothing really matters. Your only thought is: "how can I get some food?" Believe me, this is one of the worst feelings that you can have. Anything that moved would be eaten. You couldn't find any cockroaches because that was food.

We had a nine o'clock curfew, and after that we weren't allowed out of the barracks. There was a large pot to use for going to the bathroom. We slept on bunk beds without mattresses, just straw. We were punished for everything: wet spots near the bathroom pot and loose straw under our beds led to severe beatings. Life wasn't easy in a labor camp; the worst was still to come once the labor camps were liquidated in 1943.

Coming back from work one day we were told that we were going to be moved to concentration camps. I remember at one place I would occasionally see a truckload of men in stripes, and I knew they were from the concentration camps. We had to undress and stand in front of the commission again. Those who were weak were sent to the left, and those the Germans felt were still able to work were sent to the right.

You never wanted to end up in the infirmary. If you did, you could last a day or two, but the SS would conduct inspections in the infirmary and send everyone there to Auschwitz, or to some other neighboring camp that had ovens. I had an infection on the bottom of my foot once that I cut out with a piece of glass. I never wanted to go to the infirmary; I knew I'd never come out if I did.

On the night the labor camp was liquidated, we marched about eight kilometers in columns of 50 to Gross-Rosen concentration camp. There was one SS officer in front of us and one in back, both with rifles loaded.

It was wintertime, and it was snowing. I became panicked and had severe pains in my stomach just looking at the camp. Gross-Rosen had double-barbed wire in three lines: one in front, one in between, and one about 30 feet farther out. The inside line of barbed wire was electric, so if you approached it you got electrocuted. There were towers with machine gun mounts every few hundred yards, and SS officers walking around with dogs that were ready to rip you apart.

In the concentration camp there were people of all nationalities: Poles, Russians, Frenchmen, Italians, Greeks, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, and even Germans. The conditions were very difficult. Every barracks had 600 members with a *Kapo* in charge of it and his assistant. Inspections were conducted day and night. I hid a piece of glass so I could shave whenever I could, because when they had inspections and they found unshaved areas you would get 50 lashes. Very few people survived the lashes, because they were done with iron covered in leather. The *Kapos* administered the punishment with all their force. I was lashed once and couldn't sit for a long time. It penetrated your skin.

Sunday was our day off, but they would make us carry piles of debris from one place to another, then clean the old area up. When you were finished, they made you take the pile to its original location. They were trying to demoralize us. They made us wear striped uniforms that looked like pajamas but were harsh on the skin. We didn't have underwear, so in the winter we froze. There were fires, but only for the Germans.

In the morning assembly, the people that had died during the night were piled on top of each other. I remember two Russian prisoners arguing over a piece of soap until a *Kapo* hit them and they fell on the floor. He pressed his boots on each of their throats until they died. This became routine. We became so accustomed to death and dying that it stopped meaning anything. The survival ratio was very small. My brother and I hung on and helped each other; we did what we could.

Then things got worse. The Russians were getting closer to Bavaria and the Germans feared being captured by them. We had to evacuate, which became the so-called "death march." Those who couldn't keep up were shot. Most of the SS soldiers in the camp were Ukrainian; they couldn't speak German, but they hated Jews with a passion.

We walked and walked, and people were shot. When someone fell down and couldn't get back up he was shot. We spent our nights in horse stalls full of infection and horse lice that caused typhus. My brother was one of the unfortunates; he wound up with typhus and died in my arms, six weeks before the liberation. This was the worst for me. My brother and I had managed to be together for over three years, and now I no longer had the desire to live. There was no reason for me to survive.

But somehow I did. One day I went down to the barracks and the guards were gone. Before we knew it, a battalion of Polish soldiers entered the camp and told us we were free. They interviewed us and set us free. That was easier said than done, because most of us, like me, were just skin and bones. I was in no condition to go anywhere.

If I had been liberated by the allies, I would have been sent to a Displaced Persons camp and received clothing, medical care, and food. Since I was on the Russian side, I had to care for myself.

Going back to Poland wasn't easy, because there little transportation to be had. Trains at the time could travel about 50 kilometers, but then you'd have to find another one. I had a suitcase full of things I'd acquired, but every time we stopped Russians soldiers would inspect us. By the time I got to Poland, my suitcase was empty.

When I arrived in Poland I was arrested for wearing German clothes, and they thought maybe I was part of the *Hitlerjugend*.³ They checked my documents and released me.

Nobody else came home, and there was nobody there. I found out where my old governess lived; she'd gotten married since I left. I visited with her and we cried together. Then I found out Poles in a neighboring town had killed a dozen Jews. I couldn't understand that; my father was an officer in the Polish Army, and I was born in Poland. I considered myself Polish. It turned out that the Poles who killed those Jews now owned the Jews' old homes and stores, and weren't willing to give them up. I really didn't feel safe there anymore; it seemed safer to return to Germany. So I went back to Germany.

In Germany, I joined the Palestinian Jewish Legion, a Zionist

³ The Hitler Youth was a paramilitary organization of the Nazis made up of German males aged 14-18.

organization. I was smuggled to the American side in Europe and eventually went to Marseilles, France, to wait transportation to Palestine. There were 600 of us on a boat made for 50, and when we arrived at Haifa, Palestine, the English turned us away because the camps were over capacity there. We went to Cyprus, and I joined the Israeli underground. I was finally released to go to Palestine, where I worked for awhile in construction then went into the Israeli Army as a Lieutenant.

Not long after that, I decided to move back to France, where I met and married my first wife. When President Eisenhower created a special “political refugee” category for Holocaust Survivors, my wife and I moved to America. I say: G-d Bless America.