Peter's Story:
Surviving Auschwitz
And A Death March

On the 21st of February 1944 two Gestapo men appeared at the Schwartz Bakery in Vienna, Austria, my place of employment, and arrested me because of my Jewish heritage. I was fifteen and a half years old and had held a live in job with the bakery for close to a year with their full knowledge of my racial/religious background. I was taken to the Rossauer Kaserne, an old armory in the first district of the city from which "racially impure" citizens were transported to one of the various concentration camps. After emerging from the subway station and mingling with the masses of people, the arresting officers seemed strangely nonchalant about their job often walking well ahead of me and only throwing an occasional glance backward to make sure I was following them. The momentary thought of fleeing occurred to me but was quickly discarded when considering the devastating effects my flight would have on my sisters, and the fact that I lacked sufficient social support in the community to maintain myself. And, of course, I had no full awareness of the fate that was awaiting me. A day later my older sister Susie, who had been employed as a live in maid by Frau Kroh, a director for the Vienna State Opera, was also arrested in spite of her employer's strong objections, and brought to the same facility. My younger sister Gerti had worked as a maid for a German family but had been arrested earlier and was deported to the Ravensbrueck Concentration camp under circumstances that remained unclear to me.

On the 25th of February, Susie and I, together with about 15 other Jewish prisoners, found our selves under close surveillance on a passenger train heading toward an unknown destination, fearing the worst. However, trying to cheer us up were Hans Sprotzer and Ernest Doeszy both compatriots. It was an arduous trip with nothing to eat and having to spend one night handcuffed to each other in a cold railroad station somewhere in Poland. As our trip continued the following day our fear of being taken to an extermination camp increased palpably.

Someone ventured to ask one of the two Gestapo men who were guarding us where we were headed. He claimed not to know. But soon the train slowed down and the name of the town we were entering became visible– "AUSCHWITZ". We knew what that meant and a heavy silence befell the group.

From the train station we were walked to the main entrance of the camp, which promised in large letters "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" (work brings freedom).

My mother and her future husband, Wilhelm Ornstein who adopted me and my younger sister Gerti in 1949 (Susie was already married), decided to leave Austria in September of 1939 with the expectation of having us follow them as additional visas to China became available. They entrusted we children, to our neighbors, Karl Simon and his wife, with whom we had enjoyed a close relationship. He was an ardent Communist determined to protect us from the Nazis even though he received no food ration cards for us and by then we had been expelled from school because of our Jewish heritage.

Simon resisted all Nazi pressures to relinquish us until he himself was threatened with frontline military duty in spite of his partial lameness. He managed to place us into a small Catholic convent in Vienna but not before he had falsified and destroyed documents which negated or confused parts of our Jewish background, thereby temporarily discouraging the Nazis from deporting us. The fact that neither our mother, who was half Jewish, nor we children had ever belonged to the Jewish religion, and the fact that we had been christened well before the Stichtag (the time after which, according to later formulated Nuremberg racial laws, such christening no longer provided protection) did help in significantly delaying Nazi persecution.

It may not be an exaggeration to claim that our rather complicated racial/religious and social backgrounds and Karl Simon's courageous interventions on our behalf, at his great personal risk, may have saved our lives.

Karl Simon was aware that our mother was half Jewish and that we children had been the result of an illegitimate union between our mother and our Jewish father. Therefore, according to the Nuremberg racial laws, we children were three quarters Jewish. Simon had destroyed all papers indicating that Wilhelm Deutsch, our biological father, ever existed. Furthermore, we had a half brother, Andreas Gold, the product of my mother's earlier marriage to a non-Jew, who was living with our Jewish grandmother who he successfully protected from persecution by joining the German Air Force. He was one quarter Jewish. I did not meet my half brother until he visited us in uniform sometime in 1940 and again in NYC in 1956.

In December of 1939 Simon was finally forced by the Nazis to give us up. He brought us to the Catholic convent in the 16th district of Vienna, which had obtained official permission by the Nazis to accept children up to 14 years of age who had similar religious backgrounds. Six nuns cared for, protected and nurtured about 30 children with very limited resources in a most commendable manner. Sister Anastasia, in particular, was the most assertive and most fearless of our protectors. We felt safe and secure there yet aware of the fact that this was only a temporary solution and that our ultimate fate remained problematic. Simon and Mr. and Mrs. Hierl, an elderly couple who had befriended and helped to support us before and after our mother left, as well as other non-Jewish friends, remained supportive and in contact with us throughout our stay in the convent.

Prior to entering the convent we always lacked social and economic stability due to our mother's chronic impoverishment. Because of this,

we had lost a full year of schooling and had attended four different schools and lived in at least as many different apartments. The last school I attended was in the 5th district of Vienna, which was a school for "non-Aryan" children. I graduated from this school in 1942 at age 14. It provided me with my soundest educational experience to date. The school had been organized by a group of Jewish professors who had been prevented from teaching elsewhere but could teach here because the school had no official standing or recognition.

When I neared age 14, Sister Anastasia informed me that she had located another facility, which accepted Jewish boys up to age 18. It was run and supported by the Wiener Kultusgemeinde (Jewish charitable organization) and required me to wear a yellow Star of David. It was my first exposure to a Jewish environment and I felt out of place even though everyone was friendly and caring, including the chain-smoking director Dr. Bach. I soon felt at home. Also, we were given a lot of freedom, allowing us to leave the facility during the daytime. I often did so but without wearing the Star of David to avoid nasty or even dangerous confrontations. It was also risky because discovery of this violation could have had very serious consequences. At the same time I realized that being in a Jewish facility greatly increased the danger of being arrested and evacuated to a camp. Such constant concerns deprived me of the security I'd felt while living in a Catholic Convent.

This fear was soon realized when in September of 1942, after only about 8 weeks in this facility, a contingent of Gestapo men appeared without warning and transported all of us to a nearby collection area. It was an emptied school building in the 2nd district of the city, which was used for collecting and transporting non-Aryan citizens to a ghetto like Theresienstadt or to an extermination camp like Auschwitz. The facility held about 100 people at any given time. Living in the flea infested place under subhuman conditions, and under constant dread of being

evacuated drove some inmates to act out in self destructive and sometimes suicidal ways.

At that time, and in this place, I was reunited with my 2 sisters Susie and Gerti who had been relocated from the convent to an orphanage prior to being sent to this facility. The facility was referred to as the Sperlgasse, which was the name of the street where the facility stood. We were soon contacted by a young remarkable Jewish social worker by the name of Francis Loeb who had assumed the responsibility of finding living arrangements and, possibly, jobs for Jewish children still remaining in the city.

A high ranking Gestapo man by the name of Anton Brunner who had distinguished himself by having made Vienna Judenfrei (free of Jews) was in charge of completing the job by deporting those who were racially mixed or even those who had previously been protected by their non Jewish spouses. For this purpose he periodically reviewed the papers and backgrounds of present and newly arrived victims' documents to decide who should be deported expeditiously and to which camp. His appearance always created a controlled panic among us. My sisters and I were subjected to three of his interrogations during our internment in the Sperlgasse facility. Each time he seemed puzzled when reviewing our documents, commenting that they were incomplete, that our biological father's race remained uncertain and, therefore, our degree of Jewishness as well. Surprisingly, Brunner remained pleasant and almost sympathetic toward us. He finally concluded that "you don't look Jewish to me and I will therefore discharge you from this facility. You may leave as soon as the social worker has made some living arrangements for you." He smilingly returned the papers to us. We were incredulous but ecstatic. The next day, on our way out of this dangerous place, Brunner was just arriving. He stopped to wish us good luck. We were thirteen and a half,

fourteen and a half and sixteen years old. It was a most unlikely and incredible incident.

One of the most notorious and feared mass murderers of our time, a man who had sent thousands of Austrian Jews to their death in Eastern Extermination Camps had spared our lives. While thankful, we remained fully aware of the enormity of his crimes and did not volunteer to serve as character witnesses when he was tried and subsequently executed after the war. Our social worker Francis Loeb led us from the Sperlgasse to the last remaining facility for Mischlinge (Jewish children of mixed religious background) in Vienna. This facility was located in the 2nd district of Vienna in the Mohapelgasse (now called Tempelgasse). Dr. Bondi and a small staff directed and protected us to the best of their ability. About a dozen children, including one baby, were housed there. Francis Loeb worked tirelessly for us and even managed to find employment for the older children without ever trying to conceal their religious background from potential employers. Four of we children were hired by a paper factory, which also employed a few French prisoners of war. The rest of the 80 or so employees were local people. Again we were treated well by everyone especially by a young office worker who often commiserated with us and brought us sandwiches.

When Francis Loeb became concerned that the Gestapo might be planning to evacuate the children from the Mohapelgasse home, she located a furnished room for my sisters and myself in an apartment occupied by a religiously mixed couple. However, the tension filled atmosphere in that home and the cramped living space prompted us to move again. It was at that point that Francis Loeb found separate live-in arrangements for my two sisters and me. My sisters worked as maids, while I was hired as a delivery boy by the Schwartz Bakery in an outlying district of Vienna.

At this point we were again enjoying relative freedom of movement, good social support and secure employment. Our respective employers treated us very well. We were not threatened or persecuted by the Gestapo. The year was 1943 and we began to feel we had a reasonably good chance of surviving the war in Vienna.

Then, unexpectedly and ominously we were summoned to the Gestapo headquarters in Vienna with our documents. We were panic stricken. However, the interrogating officer was civil towards us. He wanted to know whether we knew a certain Mr. Raab. Raab was a relative, our mother's brother-in-law who was married to her sister. The officer sarcastically continued, "a fine relative. Mr. Raab is a civilian employee of the German Wehrmacht (Army), who claimed to know your family and claimed to know for a fact that your biological father was Jewish." We were stunned. We realized that this denunciation put us into immediate danger of being deported to a Concentration Camp. The Gestapo man however allowed us to return to our respective jobs without indicating how this new revelation might affect our future. In any case, our sense of security had been shattered and Karl Simon's heroic efforts to keep us out of the clutches of ruthless murderers proved to have been in vain.

We returned to our places of employment where we remained without major incidence until Gerti, my younger sister was arrested at her employer's house and was subsequently shipped to the Ravensbrueck concentration camp. A few months later, in February of 1944 Susie and I were also arrested and sent to Auschwitz within a few days.

Thanks to Karl Simon's efforts our arrests and deportations occurred relatively late in the overall Nazi scheme to destroy "undesirable" individuals. Transports of European Jews, however, had already been in progress for some years, which was rumored but viewed

skeptically by some. But on the 23rd of February Susie's and my journey to Auschwitz began.

On the 25th of February we arrived at the gates of Auschwitz and stood under the notorious sign that read "Arbeit Macht Frei". We stood in freezing weather for about 2 hours until the SS Guards decided to walk us to Auschwitz #2, Birkenau a distance of about one mile. Exhausted, starving and cold the group was thoroughly dispirited by this time. Hardly a word was spoken. We were led to the end of the camp, past rows of barracks and the Crematories (which we did not recognize as such at the time) into a large building with something like a reception area. We were told to line up and to wait for the Doctor. Shortly, a German doctor in SS uniform appeared accompanied by a young man in civilian clothes, holding a clipboard. We later learned he was a Russian prisoner of war named Bogdan. The doctor separated us into two groups with the results duly noted by Bogdan. He then left abruptly. Susie had been assigned to one group and I to the other. We quickly noted that her group was smaller in number, younger and fitter, which we did not understand at that time but intuitively felt was the safer group in which to be placed. In fact, we had just undergone our first "Selection". The group I was in, we found out later had been relegated for extermination. Without hesitation Susie had approached Bogdan, who still held the clipboard, and begged him to transfer my name to her group, which he agreed to do. By this act Susie had saved my life, which I did not realize until the next day when we found out that all of the members of the group I was assigned to had been murdered. Our compatriots from the train to Auschwitz, Hans Sprotzer and Ernest Doeszy had also survived the selection. Next, men and women were separated, we had our heads shaved, were getting deloused and put into prison garb. We had a number tattooed on our left forearm. My number is 174440. Men were walked into the male quarantine camp, which was used to prevent the

spreading of communicable diseases. This camp was the first in a row of adjacent sub camps, all housing prisoners for different purposes but all aimed at extinguishing their lives in one way or another. All consisted of identical wooden structures, each capable of holding up to about 800 bodies and consisting of three tier wooden bunk beds which slept 6 men per tier. It was extremely cramped and unsanitary and it was not uncommon to wake up next to a dying or deceased man.

It was difficult to practice personal hygiene with only a piece of sandy soap and no hot water. With the washrooms and primitive toilets located in separate open barracks, people would often go unwashed for lengthy periods of time, especially during the cold months.

We quickly learned of the dreaded selections, which were routinely performed but without warning, by SS guards, usually at night. We were introduced to the selections in our first night in the camp. That night we were awakened by loud anguished screams from the adjacent camp where a newly arrived transport of Jewish prisoners was loaded on trucks to be transported to the gas chambers. The screams of the victims, who were often aware of their impending fate, left us shaken and sleepless.

At the end of the one month quarantine, those still living were marched to Camp D, the labor camp. As we exited our camp, one of the drunken Capos shook his cane at us, yelling, "Ihr Hunde Wollt Ihr Weiter Leben? Jetzt Geht Ihr Euren Tod Entgegen." (You dogs, you want to stay alive? You are now going to meet your death).

It was only a short distance to the labor camp. Once there, our group of about 100 prisoners was dispersed over a few barracks. Hans and I were assigned to the same barrack while Doesze was sent to a different area of the camp as well as to a different work unit. I rarely saw him after that and was unaware of his ultimate fate after the uprising but I met him by accident back in Vienna, months later.

Life in the labor camp was harsh and often brutal. Starvation, illness (especially cholera and dysentery) and depression caused rapid physical and mental decline of many prisoners. Feelings of utter hopelessness drove some to end their lives by touching the electrified wires at night. Younger prisoners seemed more resilient and more adaptive. I never considered committing suicide, only focused on how best to survive with the least damage to myself.

Barrack elders controlled the inmates, assigned to their barracks. They were never Jews. They tended to function as assistants to the guards by assembling the inmates every morning outside their barrack in time for the SS guards to perform their daily count. They enjoyed some preferred treatment and some had established friendly relationships with the SS guards. Most of them were serving fixed sentences for political or criminal offenses. Occasionally they were encouraged to perform selections while the SS guards looked on.

Being lined up for the morning count was always extremely stressful for us and sometimes deadly. The count was performed in all weather conditions, lasting at least an hour, sometimes two or more hours when the count needed to be repeated. Prisoners who collapsed were usually taken to the infirmary or possibly to the gas chambers. Those who survived had to join their respective work detail if able to walk at all. Talking during the count could be severely punished and making eye contact with an SS guard was also dangerous. Thus whenever I was near a guard I felt in mortal danger, recognizing his absolute power over me, and the fact that he could kill me on the spot with impunity. I quickly learned to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, to avoid all eye contact with him and to conceal my inner state by exhibiting a bland and neutral demeanor. Jewish prisoners were in greater danger of being brutalized or killed than were other prisoners. As far as I recall, only Jews

and Gypsies (who were usually killed on arrival) had to fear the gas chambers on a routine basis.

A simpler, faster and less dangerous recount was conducted as work groups re-entered the camp in the afternoon. When the count revealed that a prisoner was missing, the whole group was punished by having to remain standing for hours. Occasionally a prisoner or prisoners managed to escape from the camp. When he/they were caught, as was usually the case, all had to attend their public hanging.

Shortly after being transferred to the work camp, Hans Sprotzer had the great misfortune of being selected to work in the Sonder Commando (the special squad unit). He was transferred to the barrack which housed all members of this unit and which was isolated from the general population. Their gruesome task was to dispose of murdered victims. And because they had become eyewitnesses to these crimes, the whole group was periodically liquidated and replaced with new prisoners. Against strict regulations, I managed to visit Hans a few times and always found him serene and supportive. He never lost his humanity and his natural dignity. Hans perished in the uprising of the special squad unit a few months later. He will never be forgotten.

Block elders were never Jews, nor do I recall ever having heard of a Jewish Capo, which was the title of the prisoner in charge of a working unit. Jewish prisoners were kept from obtaining any degree of status or power with a possible exception of some Jewish doctors who were used to man the infirmary of the camp.

Selections were carried out sporadically, suddenly and almost always at night, rarely involving more than one or two barracks at a time. Typically, all lights would suddenly be turned on, the block elder and a few SS men who stormed in would order all prisoners to get off their bunks and line up, usually in the nude. The line of trembling people would then be ordered to pass the inspecting guards who then picked the

individuals to be loaded onto awaiting trucks, which immediately transported the prisoners to the gas chambers.

Block elders could sometimes influence this process, if they were so inclined, especially when they had a good relationship with the commanding guard or when they happened to actually be respected in the camp. Such was the case after I had been transferred to a recently opened youth block, which held about 600 males under the age of 20. Assigned to this block, as the block elder, was an Austrian who, for unclear reasons, held such a high status with the SS personnel that he was allowed to practically perform the selections by himself. He delivered never more than a few sickly individuals to the SS. All we knew about him was that wearing a black triangle on his coat indicated that he had been convicted of a major non-violent crime. The man, whose name I no longer recall, saved many young lives by actually refusing to deliver the quota of prisoners demanded by the SS guards.

The kind of work one was assigned to could greatly influence one's chances of survival since some jobs were physically extremely demanding, may have exposed the prisoners to harsher weather conditions or may have subjected them to more brutal treatment on part of the Capos. On the other hand, in some instances, block elders insisted prisoners report to their work group even when gravely ill. People sometimes collapsed and died on the spot. Often, totally emaciated and mentally unfocused individuals could be seen stumbling along the way, completely out of contact with their surroundings and beyond any kind of helpful intervention. A high degree of apathy could also be observed in prisoners who, while still functioning, had given up all hope of surviving this ordeal.

With the help of the Austrian block elder I usually landed inside work, which not only protected me from the fierce elements but sometimes also provided me with some extra food from non-Jewish

fellow prisoners who were allowed to receive packages from family members. I was particularly lucky in getting my very last job in which I was to collect broken tools in need of repair. This job allowed me to cover a large area within the campgrounds almost without supervision or interference. It was then that I first learned that my sister Susie was alive and working in a nearby potato field where I could visit her on the sly. In addition, the Capo was also Austrian, and the supervising SS sergeant was a young German who was very protective of us. He praised my High German which one rarely heard in the camp. He was openly critical of what he saw in the camp and stated "German culture has regressed by 2000 years." We just listened.

One of my tool collection trips led me near the railroad line that passed through the area of my activity. It apparently served to supply the Eastern Front. The tracks were built on top of an embankment about 5 or 6 feet above the campground. On it, a young soldier stood guard. One day he began asking me about the camp and why I was there, by doing so he innocently put me at a high risk since any interactions with outsiders were strictly forbidden and could result in severe punishment. Regardless, I took the risk and surreptitiously responded, as he seemed sincere and even concerned. We met again the following day at which time he offered me a wrapped sandwich by rolling it down the embankment. Hunger helped me to overcome any of my distrust and fear of discovery so that I quickly retrieved the sandwich after making certain that we were not being observed. This interaction was silently repeated a few more times until the sympathetic young soldier no longer appeared at this post.

At one time I over heard a prisoner claiming that he had heard of a case in which a Jewish prisoner regained his freedom from a camp by proving that the Gestapo had miscalculated his degree of Jewishness as decreed by the Nuremberg Race Laws. Remembering that Gestapo Chief

Brunner had released us in Vienna because he was unable to determine our degree of Jewishness, I felt it was worth the risk to request a re-evaluation of my racial status. After filing a formal request with the local SS, I was summoned to the office a few weeks later to be told the review, which had been conducted, did not allow for a change of my present status. Another young prisoner's effort was similarly rebuffed. As we had to leave the camp, which we had done with permission of the SS guard, to get to the office only a few meters away, we assumed we could return to the camp in the same way after the interviews. But one of the officers came charging after us, infuriated with us for having left without permission. He ordered us to return to the office to be properly punished. Bending me over a wooden chair in a kneeling position, one of the officers held the chair while the second administered heavy blows across my back with a wooden cane. The officer was so enraged that I felt he was trying to kill me and he did not stop until the other officer began yelling at him and finally had to physically restrain him.

My next furtive get together with my sister Susie turned out to be our last in the camp. The delightful news was that our other sister, Gerti, had been transferred from Concentration Camp Ravensbrueck to Birkenau and was now housed with Susie. Both of them were to be transferred to a small camp in Czechoslovakia. This seemed a lucky break, as that camp, very likely, had no gas chambers, increasing their chances of survival. We agreed to meet in Simon's house if we survived this disaster.

In the meantime, Hungarian Jews had been brought into Birkenau in such great numbers that many of the gassed corpses could not be burned fast enough in the crematories so that a few huge ditches were dug to escalate the process. It was reported that, like many other European leaders, Admiral Horty of Hungary had finally capitulated to Hitler and had thereby betrayed his country's Jews.

In the meantime, escape attempts seemed to become more frequent if not more successful. Jewish prisoners and non-Polish speaking ones seemed to have less of a chance to succeed as they found less support from the surrounding Polish population. Public hangings of recaptured prisoners became more frequent. Daily routines seemed to have become less organized, more unpredictable and, therefore, more threatening to us.

We were always eager to find out about the progress of the war, but had no access to any source of reliable information, but gathered that Allied Forces had landed on the shores of France. The fact that occasionally low flying allied planes, and bombings of sub-camps and of railroad tracks and of some industrial targets suggested to us the end of the war may be near. But major routines of camp life continued. Selections, illness and starvation continued to take its toll. And prisoners continued to be shuttled back and forth between different camps. The uprising of the Sonder Commando (special squad unit) which killed many of it's members, including Hans Sprotzer, plus a few SS men, also suggested that the administration may be losing it's grip. While such new developments raised our hope of survival, many other prisoners had become totally apathetic and detached from these developments.

I contracted Scabies, which was a common skin disease in the camp. It's very contagious, very itchy and causes discoloration of the skin. Fearing that my condition may be discovered by SS men when I had to strip during selections, I tried to refrain from scratching for as long as possible, hoping that I would not be transferred to the block where skin ailments were treated but where one's survival was uncertain. However, I couldn't prevent the progress of the disease and once so diagnosed was promptly transferred to the "skin block." On this block over 100 prisoners suffering from various skin conditions were housed, and I felt I was in danger of contracting a possibly more serious ailment. The

treatment received was surprisingly effective for my condition although blotches remained and the itching had not completely subsided. Every morning an SS doctor appeared who quickly glanced at the prisoner's condition, releasing some from the block, although we never knew how they were disposed of. There was always a truck parked outside the block, probably to transport unimproved prisoners to the gas chambers, we feared. Thus, these inspections always created an atmosphere of near panic.

One morning, the infamous and feared Dr. Mengele himself performed the inspection. Asking no questions and barely looking at the patients, he took no more than twenty minutes to complete the tour and was ready to rush out of the building. I had been treated for 6 or 7 days by then, felt my skin condition had improved and, in my despair, decided to plead my case directly to him. He had just passed me, so I took a few steps forward and lightly tugged on his coat. He turned toward me in surprise, looked at me and gave me enough time to blurt out that I was feeling much better and was ready to go back to work. This incident could have ended tragically for me, but instead, without checking my claim he said something to the affect of "good, you can go back," and left the barrack. I was immediately discharged and allowed to return to my barrack. This incident may have saved my life although I was never able to learn of the fate of the remaining patients. It also typified the arbitrariness under which we lived every day and every minute during our incarceration.

The revolt of the Sonder Commando took place on October 7th, 1944. A total of about 300 prisoners were involved, fighting the SS guards with a few light weapons, hammers, axes and stones and with anything else they could garner. Before those heros were murdered, after about 3 hours of fighting, members of the Sonder Commando managed

to kill at least 3 SS guards and wounded untold others and managed to destroy one crematory. Hans Sprotzer died on the scene.
Two hundred and fifty prisoners died in the battle and 4 female prisoners were hanged for having supplied the rebels with self-made grenades.

The uprising did much to destabilize camp routine and to undermine the guard's sense of security. In addition it had been rumored that Russian forces were advancing rapidly westward. Nazi forces began to accelerate their transfer of prisoners to western lying camps while, at the same time, continuing to admit new prisoners from other camps. They also continued their mass murderous ways, hanging recaptured prisoners and sending Jews and Gypsies to the gas chambers. But the heavy Russian guns became more and more audible and the intermittent Allied bombings of auxiliary camps became more frequent. Prisoners were being terrorized to the bitter end.

Realizing that the camp population was being radically reduced and knowing that the SS murderers, who tried to destroy the evidence of their monstrous crime caused me to fear that I and my fellow survivors might fall victims to another final solution. As it turned out, I later learned that Himmler had ordered that Birkenau be liquidated and "leave no trace of the extermination camp."

The dismantling of the crematories 2, 3 and 4 began in November of 1944 and was completed by December 12, 1944 and number 5 was dynamited by the SS on January 26, 1945. At that point there was still a total of about 30,000 prisoners in Auschwitz including auxiliary camps according to the records.

The Nazi command appeared to have underestimated the speed with which the Soviet Army advanced, judging from the panic-like but unsuccessful efforts to empty the camps of prisoners and to destroy all evidence of their crimes. Thousands of prisoners from Auschwitz and from the auxiliary camps were hastily gathered, organized into long

columns, supplied with some bread and transported or marched through snow covered Silesia, away from the Russian front.

The evacuation of Birkenau began on January 18th, 1945. Many prisoners too weak or too sick to march (about 2,000 in Birkenau) were left behind to fend for themselves. Some actually survived in the camps and were rescued by Russian troops a few days later.

There were several marches over the span of a few days. My march began on the 18th with what I estimated to be a couple of thousand prisoners. The plan was, we were told, to walk us until we could connect with a train that would deliver us into a west lying camp. It never happened, nor was it probably ever actually planned. We never walked through a village or near railroad tracks. The Russian front had come much too close as attested to by the heavy artillery fire. We suspected the worst outcome but felt totally helpless. After having walked for some hours the guards invited tired prisoners to climb into the trucks that accompanied us. Only the very gullible or totally exhausted accepted this deceptive offer. So did one of the two Viennese boys, cousins, I was walking with in spite of our desperate efforts to dissuade him from doing so. According to his cousin, whom I met some months later in Vienna, he was never seen again. We kept hearing intermittent rifle shots, evidently executions carried out on other hopelessly demoralized victims. Many prisoners died on this first day of marching. By late afternoon we had entered a forested area, passing an occasional farm but with no train tracks in site. It was getting dark and we became more and more fearful of the guards intentions. But instead they had located a couple of abandoned farm buildings for us to spend the night in. We literally were sleeping on top of each other because of insufficient space. Closely guarded, we were allowed to go outside in small groups to relieve ourselves. I do not recall receiving water or food during these two days of marching, but we felt so totally exhausted that we just needed to go to

sleep regardless of what the guards had planned to do to us. It occurred to me much later that they might have decided against a mass execution at that point for fear that too many of us might escape into the forest in the dark.

Early next morning I awoke to the thumping noises of prisoner's corpses who had succumbed during the night being thrown into waiting trucks. As we resumed marching, weakened prisoners kept falling by the wayside and were executed on the spot without further pretenses by the guards. At this point only the most unaware or out of contact prisoners may still have doubted the fate that awaited us. Soon we heard rumors that Russian forces had taken the surrounding area thereby preventing us from marching much further. We later learned the German forces had been putting up a fierce defense in these parts of Silesia, resulting in the repeated changing of hands of some cities.

By late afternoon we had reached a relatively isolated stretch of road on our march. We kept slowly moving on the same snow covered country road with a fairly dense forest to our left and some open meadows and distant farmhouses to our right. It was beginning to get dark. We could hear dogs barking. I felt cold and hungry. Many marchers seemed near collapse. I wondered how we would spend the night. No one talked, probably harboring the same concerns that plagued me. We were just passing an expansive snow covered meadow to our right. Suddenly there was a lot of commotion among the SS guards. I noticed that those walking on the forest side were moving to the open side of the road thereby aligning themselves with their fellow assassins. They were yelling orders to each other and screaming at us to stop walking. Then, within seconds they had raised their rifles and automatic weapons and at point blank range began shooting at us terror stricken, screaming, stumbling masses using our last bit of energy in the desperate but mostly futile effort to stay alive. Those of us who survived

the initial onslaught were being driven down into the forest relentlessly pursued by the killers. I saw people near me being mowed down, screaming and moaning and dying. I realized in an instance that playing dead was my best chance of surviving this massacre. The road we had just left was somewhat higher than the forest floor, where I was now running, and perpendicular to it. Next to me I noticed a narrow frozen brook in which a body was lying, perhaps dead. I quickly dropped myself into the same brook behind the body. I dropped face down, where I remained motionless for what seemed like an eternity but was probably about an hour. I could hear the killers walking near me and pistol shots being fired close by while listening to the moans and screams of the wounded and dying. I must have been visible to passing guards. But if any did spot me they must have taken me for dead and, instead, chose to hunt down still fleeing victims. When the firing seemed a little further away I dared to raise my head very slightly and noticed an almost imperceptible movement of the right foot of the body in front of me. I realized he was signaling me that he was alive. The joy I felt is hard to describe. I felt together we had a better chance of finding a safe way out of the woods and perhaps making contact with the not too distant Russian forces. We both remained motionless until darkness and the heavy shooting had mostly subsided. It was still too dangerous to leave the forest but we began to whisper with one another, although he understood little German and I little Russian. His name was Ivan and he was a young Russian soldier who had been in Auschwitz as a POW. Finally we decided to climb up separate trees, as high as possible, and remain there until the forest was still. I secured myself to the tree with a scarf that I had managed to bring with me. Extremely fatigued and sleep deprived sitting in a precarious position forced me to remain awake. Occasional gun and pistol shots could still be heard which suggested that guards were still searching the forest for survivors.

After about an hour or so in the trees, Ivan signaled me to come down. It was close to midnight by then and we had to leave the forest before daybreak and before suffering serious frostbite. And we needed to find food and safe quarters soon. This meant we had to take the risk of running across the expansive snow covered and moonlit meadow to reach the closest farmhouse.

We began running across the meadow in a zigzag manner. Hearing dogs barking and suddenly increased rifle fire told us that we might have been spotted by the still patrolling SS. Arriving at the far end of the meadow, we laid still for a while, wondering whether we had been noticed by any of the villagers. But except for the continuing barking of dogs, everything was still. We tiptoed up the outside stairway of the farmhouse and quietly opened the door leading to the hayloft. We dug ourselves deep into the hay, hoping to get some sleep without being discovered. However, within a few minutes someone opened the loft door, wanting to know who was hiding in the hay. After some hesitation we decided it was safer to come out from our hiding and to try to gain the farmers support. He invited us to come downstairs where he and his wife rightly surmised, "you must be hungry" and offered us food and drink. They of course knew immediately that we were survivors of the earlier massacre, much of which occurred within earshot of the village. He reminded us that the village was still occupied by the Germans adding "if they find you here, we're all going to die together." After obtaining some supportive comments from both, he said, "you can go back upstairs and sleep the night. Tomorrow I have to find some other area for you to sleep because you can't stay here. It's too risky." He promised to provide us with food and other necessities.

We expressed our gratitude and went back upstairs but once alone, wondered about the trustworthiness of the farmer's promise to not report us to the German authorities. On the other hand, the farmer knew

that the takeover of the area by Russian troops was imminent and that they themselves might be severely punished for any treachery they committed. In any case, we felt too exhausted and still too worried about our own safety to obsess any further about the quandary we, and the farmer both found ourselves in.

The farmer had kept his word. Early the following morning he gave us something to eat, gave us a couple of blankets and then took us to one of the gigantic haystacks nearby which were propped up a couple of feet off the ground. We crawled into this empty space, he told us to move and talk as little as possible and that he would signal us to emerge from our hiding place after darkness set in. It was very cold and uncomfortable but the thought of being safe and of gaining our freedom soon kept us motivated. We could hear German soldiers passing our hideout but they did not seem to be searching for escaped prisoners. When it was dark he would allow us to come out from under the haystacks and into his farmhouse.

For a few long days during which our lives remained in balance due to the near unbearable physical conditions we lived under as well as the unpredictable behavior of desperate German soldiers I kept wondering how my sisters had been fairing and whether they were still alive. In the meantime the farmer and his wife did their best to keep us alive.

Even though all along we had heard Russian gunfire, they were not able to occupy the village for several more days. Then, one morning we heard loud and jubilant noises mixed with unmistakable Russian voices. The village had finally been taken without resistance. Emerging from our hideout we were embraced by a small group of fellow survivors who had apparently been hiding nearby under similar conditions. There were about 10 people of various nationalities and in varying physical and mental condition (one survivor actually died within days of liberation).

After thanking the farmers for having kept us alive, and intoxicated by our new found freedom we celebrated with our hospitable Russian saviors some of whom seemed unaware of the mass murder that had taken place only a short distance from us. My Russian compatriot who had played such an essential part in getting us out of the deadly forest, quickly joined his comrades in arms, but not before he had convinced the officer in charge that we had been prisoners in a German concentration camp and recent survivors of mass murder committed by SS assassins. The officer had claimed they had encountered German soldiers in civilian clothes who had tattooed numbers on their arms, claiming to have been German prisoners. After some more intensive questioning by the officer we were invited to eat and drink with him and to rest up for the night. After a restful night and a full meal the Russians prepared to continue their pursuit of the Nazis while our small group of survivors tried to orient our selves and to find a safe area where we could await the end of the war and begin planning our return home. The Russian officer warned us to be cautious, as the area was not fully secured. He advised us to walk toward Gleiwitz, which was only about a half days walk and in which a General's headquarters was located. He thought that we would be well received and well cared for by him. And the officer recommended us to him in a hand written note, which would also serve as a safeguard on our somewhat risky journey since the area had not been reliably secured as yet.

After an uneventful days walk we reached the city of Gleiwitz which at one time housed about 150,000 people but which was mostly destroyed and seemed mostly uninhabitable. We went directly to the General's headquarters and he received us in the most cordial manner. We also met another group of survivors there. The General was fully aware of the horrendous experience we had endured and promised us protection and assistance. He invited us to spend the night in his

quarters and suggested that the next day we locate an apartment in one of the many empty buildings in the city. He also issued us in three languages more official looking passes which were meant to allow us free movement throughout the Russian occupied areas of the city. Very few civilians could be seen walking the streets of the city at any time of the day or night. No businesses were open. One time, soon after arriving in Gleiwitz I passed a bank that had been vandalized. There was a large pile of German marks lying on the walkway outside the bank. I did not touch the money because I feared being arrested by Russian soldiers and because I thought they would be worthless in Austria anyway. But when I returned to Vienna a few months later, I found the German currency still valid and remaining so for about another year. Empty apartments were easily located as most civilians had fled the city but I was regularly subjected to the threats of marauding Russian soldiers who could become very hostile when frustrated in their search for women, vodka and watches. On one occasion a Russian soldier placed a gun to my head when he realized that I could not procure any of those items for him. Many of them were illiterate or just tended to ignore the passports issued by the General. The other danger was getting arbitrarily picked up off the street by soliders presumably to perform labors or other unknown tasks. In spite of the assurances received from the General, there was no organized effort to enforce rules or to protect innocent civilians. After all, we actually lived among combat forces who were often unable to communicate with each other because they spoke different languages. Some of these soldiers had never seen a timepiece or any of the common, simple electrical gadgets until they'd entered some of the Western lying territories.

Strangely, I did not notice or had paid no attention to the frostbite I had suffered in my feet until the stress and effort of merely surviving had

passed. At that point my feet felt so sensitive that I could not even tolerate a thin cover on top of them.

There was very little to eat until the Russian military post office moved into the building I was living in. This changed everything. Full protection was finally provided after the post office opened. The Post Master, a very gregarious and fun loving man of around fifty saw to it that there was enough food and drink available at all times. They seldom performed their duties in a sober state. I no longer had to fear being exposed to the unpredictable behavior of angry soldiers. During my stay in Gleiwitz the post office remained in my building even as some combat troops came and went along with the battlefront.

No official means of information concerning the status of the war were available to us but I managed to obtain fragments of what was happening from the soldiers I lived with. Fortunately at no time during our stay in the city did German forces threaten to retake the city again.

I had remained in touch with some of my fellow survivors who I had hiked to Gleiwitz with but who had been housed in different apartment buildings. As the weeks passed we began to contemplate our return to our respective homes. We all felt very apprehensive about what we would find, whether our friends and family members were still living and whether we still had homes to go to. We had completely lost contact with everyone and everything. We agreed to remain in Gleiwitz for now until the war had ended, which did not happen for another three months or so. This waiting period gave us a chance to recover some more from our physical and emotional traumas. At this point it was still winter and the war was still raging within only about 50 to 75 miles from us. We also spent time meeting some of the local people who chose to remain in the city during the Russian onslaught. Most sympathized with our tragic experience, some offered their assistance and others claimed to be unaware of the atrocities committed by the Nazi Regime.

In early May of 1945 our host, the Field Postmaster informed me that the German forces on the Eastern Front had been defeated so we could safely return home. He warned us that extensive stretches of railroad tracks had been destroyed, which would force us to walk considerable distances. The fact that the entire area was Russian occupied presented its own risks.

Five of we survivors agreed to undertake the arduous and risky journey together, one Hollander, two Germans and two Austrians, myself and a man named Ernest Szasz. Ernest was the oldest among us at 48. I don't recall the names of the non-Austrians. To my eternal regret, other than with Ernest, we failed to stay in contact.

One early May morning in 1945, carrying our meager belongings, we left the demolished city of Gleiwitz and with great anticipation headed generally southward. Without maps or any reliable directive, we still felt optimistic about finding our way. Actually after a couple of days the two Germans and the Hollander began to head westward while Szasz and I continued on our trek southward. I often wondered how they fared on their much longer and more difficult journey. The distance from Gleiwitz to Vienna was estimated to be about 150 miles, half of which we probably wound up walking, mostly through rural areas. We carried the General's multilingual pass with us, which helped us to get past a few Russian roadblocks. Obtaining pertinent information from farmers and passing strangers helped us to stay on course and occasionally resulted in being offered a free meal. But we often went hungry. Local people were usually friendly and helpful, occasionally suspicious and fearful. We often slept out in the open or in an abandoned building. Sometimes we obtained permission to stay in someone's barn. We had to walk much of the way but sometimes managed to jump on a slowly moving train that was heading in our general direction. Those trips were usually short as the

trains needed to reverse direction as soon as they neared a destroyed section of the tracks.

After about 6 days we crossed into Czechoslovakia, my mother's birthplace, where we were promptly jailed twice for speaking German to each other. But the police officers soon realized their mistakes and quickly released us with apologies. In those days the Czechs used to freely express their intense dislike of Germans but also of their Russian occupiers. While impoverished by the war we found much less physical destruction here as compared to adjacent areas. Their railway system seemed more functional and we found the people more hospitable, especially in the countryside. We always remained alert to the Russian's tendency to arrest groups of civilians for uncertain reasons or purposes. Their contempt for civilians was based on their conviction that all adults had been Nazis and their reactions may have been in part intended as a pay back for untold suffering endured during the Nazi occupation of Russia.

After about another week of tiresome and mostly uneventful travel we entered Austria. I did so with great trepidation as the trauma of my young years was reawakened and almost suppressed any feelings of happiness about returning to my homeland. My anxiety about my sisters' fate increased as well, not knowing what had happened to them after their transfer from Auschwitz to a camp in Czechoslovakia months before Auschwitz was liquidated. Feeling that my emotional bonds with my country had been irreparably damaged, I was also apprehensive as to the type of readjustment I would be able to make. At this point I felt physically exhausted from my arduous journey and emotionally drained from the various uncertainties I was facing.

A few days later we entered the outskirts of Vienna. The city presented a sad picture. The three day long bombardment by Soviet forces left some sections of the city badly damaged. The inner district

had been especially hard hit. I later realized that unemployment was very high and the populous was starving and impoverished. Black market activity was rampant. It took many weeks before some semblance of normalcy could be achieved.

Earnest Szasz had arrived home and we reunited with his eagerly awaiting wife, they invited me to spend some time with them but I was already focused on heading home to the Simon's house in Maria Enzersdorf where my sisters and I had agreed to meet had we survived Auschwitz. The town is less than 10 miles outside Vienna by trolley, which meant I could get there while it was still daylight. As I walked the short distance from the trolley to the Simon's house I trembled from excitement and fear, and was near tears when upon entering their house I realized that my sisters were not there and had not been heard from. I knew that they had been taken from Auschwitz to a camp in Czechoslovakia. I hoped that, if they had survived, they would have gotten back home before I had. I arrived at the Simon's house on May 18th, 1945 and to my indescribable relief both of my sisters arrived together healthy and well only one day later. They actually would have arrived the same day I did but they spent a night with family friends in town. We had an emotional reunion, to say the least.

Soon we had to confront the reality of our situation. There was no organization in place to aid returning concentration camp survivors. There were no jobs and nearly everyone was starving. And the Simon's tiny apartment could not accommodate us. We had little education and no connections. Once again Karl Simon came to our rescue. His lifelong membership in the communist party earned him a favorable status with the local Soviet brass. This provided him with easy access to the necessities of living and with influence in the machinations of local politics, which in turn, we benefited from. In fact Simon's influence was sufficiently strong to get the director of the local engineering school, an

ex Nazi, fired from his position for denying me entry because I could not document my past educational history. All my papers had been lost in the shuffle during various transitions.

As I began to interact with people in the community I realized that some possessed only a vague awareness of the atrocities committed in concentration camps, others tended to minimize or even deny them. Generally I found little curiosity or concern expressed. On the other hand, anti-Semitic feelings or remaining Nazi sympathies were easily aroused in conversation. Although some old friendships were successfully renewed I felt too uncomfortable living among people who, not so long ago, so enthusiastically embraced and supported Hitler and his henchmen.

Therefore as the opportunity presented itself I chose to leave the continent and to rebuild my life here in the USA. I arrived here in May of 1950 and was followed by my parents and sister Susan somewhat later. My sister Gerti had already settled in Canada.

POST SCRIPT

1). Soon after the massacre of mostly Jewish prisoners in Silesian forests in Jan. of 1945, six mass graves were uncovered in that area.

2). I was adopted by Wilhelm Ornstein in 1949 in Austria, changing my name from Mlcoch to Ornstein.

3). Anton Brunner was hanged in Vienna in 1946.

4). Wilhelm Deutsch, our biological father, died in N.Y.C in 1967. I had not seen him since I was 4 years old.

5). I settled in the USA in May of 1950, married in 1960 and have three grown children. I earned a Doctorate in Psychology in 1963.