

## Werner Epstein

### Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

My name is Werner Epstein, I was born on December 14, 1923, in Berlin Germany. Living through the depression in the years 1933-38 and coming of Hitler and Nazi Germany was very difficult. I lived with my mother, father and 3 sisters. I was the youngest. Even if life wasn't easy, the love and harmony in our household was so good that I never felt how dangerous the situation was.

In 1938, my father had to leave his job after 25 years of service. He had fought for his country in World War 1 and had been wounded and then decorated for his country. He couldn't understand why this was happening to him. You have to understand that German Jews were German first, then Jewish. I left my school 6 months shy of finishing Jr. High to help my family. I found a job in a big restaurant in West Berlin and all the money I made was for my mother. My mother was very special to me. Whatever I could do to help her was the biggest joy.

After the "Kristalnacht," I lost my job and I decided, with the support of my parents, to leave the country. I sold my bicycle and took the train for the Belgian border. I will never forget when I was in the train before leaving Berlin. All of my family; father, mother, sister, uncles, nieces, were smiling at me. I remember my mother tried to smile, but her eyes were too wet. I was like a little kid going on vacation. I didn't know what lay ahead of me, and I didn't realize I would never see my family again. My biggest regret is that I never said good-bye.

I was greeted by a Jewish organization that brought me to a home for boys. I had a good life in this home. A friend of mine, Kurt Moser asked me and another boy to go with him to visit his sister who was in a home for girls near Brussels. So, I did go with him. When we came to this big home I met his sister, but then noticed a little girl coming down the stairs with black hair, and she was crying. I went to her and asked why she was crying. She told me they had to cut her hair. I told her in about 6 months her hair would be back, and that I would be back every week to see her hair. I was 14 at this time and she was 11. This was a case of love at first sight.

When the Germans attacked Belgium, the Belgians sent the children from the "Kinderheim" to France. I had to leave Germany because I was Jewish. Then I was arrested by the Belgian police because I was German. I was put in prison for one week and then deported to France. I was put in two concentration camps: St. Cyprien I and Gurs. In St. Cyprien I contracted malaria fever. It was almost fatal, but by a miracle a Spanish doctor knew of the sickness, and I was taken out of the camp by the Swiss Red Cross and brought to a home for children in the South of France. "The Chateau De La Hille." The first girl I saw when I came in the Chateau was my little black-haired girl "Gertie". And the first thing I said was. "You see your hair is back." We both started laughing and from then on, nobody could separate us!

In 1942-43, when the Germans came near Toulouse, I decided with three of my friends to escape to Spain. Unfortunately, we didn't know that the guide worked together with the

Gestapo. When we came to the Spanish border, the Gestapo was waiting for us. I was in the Gestapo Prison. St. Michel in Toulouse for three weeks and then was sent to Birkenau Auschwitz Javorznaw. After 2 years of life in these camps, I asked myself, why am I still here, why am I alive?

After the war was over, I came back to France and found my girlfriend, "Gertie" waiting for me. Six months later, we were married. After 45 years of marriage, we had good times and bad times. We had three children: Gabrielle (the oldest), Patrick (the middle), and Sophie (the youngest). We lost our son, Patrick, at seven years of age. He had open-heart surgery and didn't survive it. My daughter Gabrielle suffered tremendously for the loss of her brother. Luckily, two years later, we had a beautiful little girl, Sophie. She brought a lot of sunshine into our home.

Five years after Patrick passed away, we decided to immigrate to the U.S.A. With my profession as "Chef De Cuisine," I had no problem finding a job and was able to make a decent living. Years later, I was able to retire on December 31, 1988. My wife Gertie passed away at 63 of cancer two years later. She was my whole life. I don't think I'll ever get over it. The portrait of the women pictured with me is a painting of the little girl with the black hair, "Gertie," my beloved wife.

Some people try to make other believe that there was no Holocaust. Let me say to these people, "If there was not a Holocaust, then we never had World War II.

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Additional text added by Werner Epstein

#### MY ROAD AND MY EXPERIENCES IN CONCENTRATION – CAMPS BIRKENAU AND JAVORZNOW

I was a Jewish immigrant and lived happily in a Swiss Red Cross Children's Colony in the "Chateau de la Hille" in the South of France. But all of a sudden, the situation became critical for us. The police fetched all Jewish families at their homes, interned them in several camps and finally deported them, via transit camp Drancy near Paris. Where to? None knew. A few of my comrades were fortunate in being able to flee to Switzerland; others managed to get to Spain.

On the 10th of June 1943 three of my comrades and I decided, also, to flee to Spain, in order to enlist into the French Army, headed by General Del Gaulle. At 12 o'clock midnight we left Mercus, a village bordering the Pyrenees and headed for Spain. Our guide, who allegedly was to lead us into Spain, was collaborating with the Germans. So, according to his scheme we were apprehended by German border patrols and were interrogated by the Gestapo. After a three-hour cross-examination the Gestapo knew less about us than before. We did concede that we were Belgian Jews, that we had registered somewhere in France, and that, somehow, we had found our way to the frontier. All efforts on the part of the Gestapo were vain. They never did find out that we had been members of the Swiss Red Cross Children's Colony.

Three weeks of military prison in Toulouse, no right to correspond with anyone, little to eat; I am slowly beginning to understand: it is just a question of sticking it out. We were transported, wearing handcuffs, to Paris-Drancy, where we stay, again, for three weeks. And now sixty of us are herded into a cattle-train, off towards an unknown destination in Poland. The mood in the train is strange. We know that we are headed into death and despite that knowledge laughter and songs are heard. We do not want to show our fear; we stride into death laughing. We disdain you; YOU ARE NOT HUMAN BEINGS. No, you are criminals, men that do not shrink from gassing thousands of human beings daily, and later, cremating the bodies. Young mothers and their infants, the old, the blind, the invalids; into the ovens without pity.

I had some luck in all this unhappiness: I was chosen, along with 500 young comrades, for work in the Camp. The process began like this: Barely had we entered the camp when we were received with beatings and kicks. I, personally, was unaware of the fact that one did not have the right to defend oneself, since the people that made our lives so hellish, were prisoners like us, named Capos. I found myself opposite one of them, about seventeen years old, who worked me over with a beastly kind of joy. When I had enough of his violence, I simply flattened the Capo out. As a punishment for this act, I got 25 beatings with a rubber truncheon. Then on went the punishment; we were stripped naked and were sent into another room where our heads and any hairy part of our bodies were shaved and some kind of salve was put on us. Now the ceremony could begin, and we were officially ready to enter the Camp...One hour later we were tattooed; now we were prisoners and were called only by our numbers. My number is 130581.

We were vaccinated; very quickly, since only one syringe was used for 500 prisoners. After one week we were sent off to our first stint of work. Reveille at 4 o'clock in the morning. One has to stand at attention from 4 to 7 A.M.: off to work without shoes. The work itself is not too demanding physically. But ceaselessly we are told to keep moving, moving, and moving. One does not get a moment's rest. Chased by the Capos we run exhaustedly, grinding our teeth; we endure; we must survive; the world has to know, must hear from living witnesses what the Germans are capable of. – At 12 noon a half hour off – At noon a half hour of respite. Soup is being dished out. One bowl for 5 men, without spoons; they force us to lick out our plates like animals. No sooner have we wolfed down our meal we go on. "Move, move", today still I hear the cry of the Capos and still feel their whiplashes. Uninterruptedly we work till seven at night, always in the same tempo, pitilessly. Homeward bound we are accompanied by the most beautiful, military music played by prisoners. Every evening, on our way home, we carry in our arms the bodies of five or six dead comrades back into Camp. Goose-step fashion, accompanied by beautiful music... Our rows have lightened: from among five hundred young men only 420 remain at week's end.

Those of my comrades who used to work, like myself, as agricultural workers, maintain themselves well. We have a common bond; we keep up each other's morale – and we refuse to give up hope... Two weeks later we are examined by a German Commission and are sent into the coal mines of Javorznaw, 50 km from Cracow. These are mines that were old and had already been closed, since underneath at a depth of 200 mi. everything was flooded and the

tunnels have collapsed frequently. These mines were opened just for us, in order to ruin us slowly....

Our work consisted in loading the coals that had slipped onto assembly lines. And this work we had to do in a bent position, in the water, dressed in prison-garb, nine hours without rest and without food. Our only food consisted of kicks and whiplashes. We got these from our supervisors because we did not satisfy their demands for faster work. After work we stagger to the mine-tramway; exhausted and starved. None says a word. We know that above the SS awaits us and will receive us as usual with kicks. Of course, we have to lift our berets for these gentlemen; we are, after all their prisoners.

After seven months of mine-work my dear comrade Kurt Moser, a boy with the character of a child at twenty-two years of age, becomes sick. He is afflicted with diarrhea, one of the most dangerous diseases in Camp. I find him in an incredible condition: skin and bones – his weight: 23 kilos. When I saw him, I cried just like a little kid, for the first time. Kurt, himself was very strong; I have to almost call him heroic. His first words were: “Werner, I think that you will manage to survive; you are the only one who has not lost his sense of humor. Tell my dear sister that I have thought of her and Ilse W. until my last moment. I go to my death laughingly. If I had a harmonica here, would play in front of the Crematorium. Believe me, it’s all the same to me; I can’t stand upright any longer – and everything I eat turns into blood. My mother must never find out that I have died.” My good comrade Kurt Moser, who was with me in the Swiss Children’s Colony, May God grant you peace; in my entire life I shall never forget you.

I have one remaining comrade: Charles B. He, too, is skin and bones. As far as his morale is concerned; it is gone. He gets an ear-infection and is transported off to Auschwitz: I never heard from him since...

I am the last of the Colony to stick it out. I have an incredible amount of energy. I want to live. I want to survive. I found out that my father, mother and three sisters were cremated there: I am the last of the family. I have to live. December 1945 – I weigh 49 kilos; exactly half of what I used to weigh before coming here. I sense and feel that if this should go on much longer, I might not be able to make it. January 1945 - I have the noon-shift, i.e. I work there from three to twelve o’clock. At twelve o’clock noon the nightshift takes over. It is 12, 1, 2, o’clock no one shows up. Something is wrong... At 3 o’clock the nightshift comes along and tells us that the Russians are advancing and that they have bombed the city of Javorznow; among other targets, of all things... our camp kitchen. None says a word. We know that the SS is capable of anything.

On January 12 or 15 comes the command to evacuate the camp and now begins the most dramatic and terrible phase in Camp Javorznow: the Death March. 4500 human beings line up in order to walk 350 km. Men that are exhausted and starved: many without footgear of any sort, the old, and the infirm. Something unheard of takes place; a thing a normal person cannot comprehend. We start out, in high snow, the icy Polish wind whistles through our thin, raggedy prison-garb. NO nourishment, no water. And we are urged on, without cease, by the SS. Every other second, we hear a shot or a machine-gun. After 24 hours without rest there are maybe

3000 men alive out of the original 4500 that started the march. The SS is terrified of the Russians; they urge us to push on. They shoot into the masses of moving men, who, with their surviving strength and energy march for their little bits of life.

After 36 hours of marching, the situation becomes intolerable. One thing I have come to understand: one must march only in the center row; whoever marches on either side is subject to summary shooting. It is simply hard to believe; death lurks at every corner. What is it? I notice that I have fallen asleep. God forbid, not that. It signifies certain death; I rub some snow into my face in order to keep awake: it helps a little. We are driven onwards accompanied by machine-gun noises. The fear drives, spurs us on. We feel the end coming – to die now, that one has survived for almost two years?

At last, the column stands still in front of a barn, big enough to hold about 600 people. Into this barn 3000 former men are shoved. Animals, beasts, starved and exhausted. It is impossible to describe what happened in detail in that barn: it was mutual murder. I, fortunately, slept a little since I tried myself to a beam and slept relatively undisturbed. The next morning the march goes on. 2500 men are still alive. We march in the direction of Breslau: I think we still have about 200 km before us. I sense that something is not right. From far away I hear machine gun fire, the SS shoots incessantly into the masses of people. We have turned into a different direction; towards 10 a.m. we arrive half dead, tired, demoralized from our experiences in Camp Blechhammer. Only 1600 remain from my former 4500 comrades...

And now in the end, the very worst experience of all: The SS pushed 3400 men into a wooden barrack and ignited the same; in front of the barrack stood a SS-Man with his machine-gun and shot at everyone who tried to get out of the burning barrack. Either to burn to death or get shot... I am alive only through coincidence: Before the SS-Man had stationed himself before the barrack; two Russians and myself were able to jump into the toilet. There we stood for seven hours, immersed in feces up to our necks, until the Russians liberated us. The Russians were very decent towards us former prisoners. We were given cigarettes, wine, and vodka. I spent three months in Poland and three months in Russia: in 300 km. From Odessa, 140 km from Kiev. And then I traveled by way of Lemberg, Brest-Litovsk, Warsaw, Berlin, Magdeburg, Braunschweig and from there by plane to Paris,

This report is dedicated to my Swiss friends. It is dedicated to a people that gave me a home during bad times, a home and nourishment in the South of France. The directors of all the colonies are Mr. And Mrs. Dubois, while my Directresses were the Misses Naeff and Temmler.