

Bernat Rosner

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born in a smallish town by the name of Tab in rural Hungary. For the first twelve years of my life, I had a basically normal and happy childhood. An important part of my personality and makeup was shaped by the rigor and discipline of a Jewish Orthodox upbringing and a sensitive and literate mother. Both of these influences imbued me with an abiding love and respect for books and learning.

Anti-Semitism was certainly not unknown in Hungary, and it existed in a good measure in our village going back as far as I can remember. It was institutional, in terms of laws that restricted the freedom of Jews from practicing certain professions or owning land and limiting the number of Jews who could be admitted to law, medical and other professional schools. It was also personal, in terms of Jews being bullied and held up to contempt and hostility – not by any means by all of the non-Jewish population, but by a substantial segment of the community, many of whom were members or followers of the Hungarian version of the Nazi and other far right-wing parties. But this was not the virulent and deadly doctrine of racism and extermination as preached and practiced by Hitler and his thugs, and the anti-Semitic undercurrents running through Hungarian political and cultural life did not significantly affect our everyday life and my basically happy and tranquil childhood

All this changed with dramatic suddenness on a very specific date, March 19, 1944, relatively late in the course of World War II. I remember the day very well. I was on my way home from a study session in preparation for my upcoming Bar Mitzvah, when a neighbor woman asked me if I had heard the news. When I asked what news she told me that the Germans had taken over the country and the government. Within the space available here, I will not go into the details of why this happened at that particular time. Those familiar with the history of Hungary during World War II and the fate of the Jews of Hungary will know all the relevant facts.

The effects of the Nazi takeover on the Jews of Hungary were immediate and disastrous. I will limit my account to what happened to me, to my family and to the Jewish community of Tab. Within days following the takeover, the stream of anti-Jewish edicts began. Jews could not travel without specific permission; soon they could not travel at all. Prominent families in the community as well as those suspected of “subversive” activities or associations began to disappear. By mid April all Jews had to wear a prominent yellow star on their outer clothing. By mid-May all Jews were herded into a ghetto. My family was lucky in this respect; our home was within the area that was designated as part of the ghetto. But our three-room home, instead of just housing my immediate family, also became home for numerous relatives, as I recall between sixteen to eighteen persons in all, whose homes were outside the ghetto boundaries.

The end of the Jewish community in Tab came during the latter part of June, 1944. On twenty-four hours’ notice we were ordered to be ready for departure in front of our homes with no

more than one suitcase per person. Two images stand out for me from the day on which we were marched down the main street of Tab to the unused brickyard next to the railroad station. The first was at the Catholic school on the way to the station where I witnessed my mother's humiliation at being stripped naked in a crowded room and hand-searched by nazi thugs. The second was at the brickyard, with only a bare earthen floor for accommodations, where an elderly woman, standing up to recite her Sabbath prayers was clubbed bloody and unconscious by one of the guards.

From Tab we were shipped to a collection point about fifty miles away, where we were unloaded onto a large open field. There, we were joined by approximately seven to ten thousand others collected from other ghettos in that part of Hungary. From there, in the last week of June 1944, we were loaded into cattle cars –between fifty to sixty men, women and children per car - headed for Auschwitz. We arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau on approximately June 30 (I remember it was a Friday). By the time the sliding door of the freight car, which remained locked throughout the five-day journey, was opened, there were at least a half-dozen corpses in the car, and many more whose minds became unhinged.

On the train platform at Auschwitz there was chaos, brutality and confusion. But my immediate family, my mother, my father and my younger brother, was still together. The first thing that happened, as we stood there dazed was an order on the loudspeaker that those in charge of each cattle car, and my father was so designated, were to report to the authorities. So my father left us and that was the last time we saw him. Next, an announcement was made that males and females should separate, because showers would be given. By now my mother was quite frightened and told my brother and me to stay with her. I told her that I was not about to take a shower with a bunch of women. My mother did not argue with me but left me with the admonition: "Whatever you do, make sure that you stay with your brother." With those words she left us, and I never saw her again. Next, all the males were ordered to line up in a single file to be inspected by two SS officers. The SS officers looked at each person as he reached the head of the line, and those who looked able-bodied and fit to work were sent to the right. Those who looked too young or too old, or otherwise unfit for work were sent to the left. My brother, who was just over ten years old, was in front of me in the line, and the SS officer, without hesitation, sent him to the left. Harking back to my mother's admonition, and without realizing the consequences of my action, I followed my brother to the left without being told to do so. I was about two steps past the SS officer when he reached over, grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, and shoved me over to the right. To this day I do not know whether the Nazi thought that I just might be fit and old enough to be put to work, or whether he was simply irritated at my having made my own decision. In any case, that shove from the left to the right made the difference on that day between my ending up in the gas chamber within the hour, and my surviving at least that initial screening process.

My ordeal obviously did not end with that fateful shove. Every day for the next ten months, until my liberation by the Americans during the first week of May 1945, was a battle for survival. That battle took several forms. Often it was a matter of trying to avoid being sent to the gas chambers. This was because, even though I survived that initial screening process, I

kept flunking the physicals that the prisoners were subjected to in order to qualify for a permanent work assignment. But mostly it was a matter of fighting and trying to survive hunger, cold, brutal beatings, overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and almost every other privation known to man. I suspect everyone who reads this has seen pictures of the cadaver-like creatures that emerged from the concentration camps upon liberation by the Allies. Well, I was one of them.

Very briefly, I will tell you how I ended up where I am, how a chance encounter in the summer of 1945 changed and gave new direction to my life. By that time, with the war in Europe over, I was in a refuge camp in Italy in the town of Modena. I was alone, just over thirteen years old, ragged and hungry. There were thousands of kids like me hustling for an extra piece of bread, or, if we were really lucky, some candy or a piece of chewing gum. The only source of those goodies was the American soldiers who were stationed near our camp. So, naturally, I spent much of my time hanging out near where the Americans were billeted. As I was standing there one day looking for a hustling opportunity, a Jeep drove up, loaded with four GI's and their duffle bags. I immediately ran up to the Jeep, headed for the nearest soldier, and with sign language, offered my services as a porter. He smiled and pointed to one of the bags. The bag was almost as big as I was, and my employer later told me that all he could see was the bag and two bare feet underneath pumping away with great energy. After I delivered the bag to his room, the soldier gave me a chocolate bar, and we attempted to make conversation. We discovered that our only means of communication was broken German.

I told him about my situation, and he was visibly moved. For the next five days he spent all of his free time with me, taking me to the movies and restaurants, treats I have never had before. We also did a lot of walking and talking. I have a picture of the two of us taken by a street photographer. Five days after I met him, the soldier was transferred, but we started corresponding with each other. The upshot of this encounter was that after the soldier returned to the US and was demobilized, he wrote me a letter offering to bring me to the US and to have me become part of his family. This story, by itself, is unique enough, but what makes it even more remarkable is that the GI who befriended me happened to be Charles Merrill Jr., the son of the founder of the Merrill Lynch financial empire. I arrived in the United States at the age of sixteen in January 1948, and the rest, as they say is history. That history, among, other things includes an education at Cornell University and Harvard Law School, a thirty-five-year legal career as in-house counsel for the Safeway food chain –the last ten of which as the Company's Chief Legal Officer.

During virtually all of my life in America I was determined not to be obsessed by the past, and was, in fact, determined to lead an "American" life, in which I considered things like the Holocaust and concentration camps to be irrelevant distractions. I pretty much succeeded in achieving that goal, until about ten years ago, when I retired from my active career. At that point I came to realize that you cannot chop up your life into separate compartments, and that the past is part of one's life and personality. I also realized that I had some obligations to fulfill.

First and foremost, was an obligation to my three children. As they grew up, they heard bits and pieces of my story, but never in a coherent or systematic way. More importantly, I kept the pain and emotion out of whatever I told them – I realize now that this was more to protect myself than them. I also owed an obligation to the family I lost, my mother, my father, my kid brother and my extended family. The story of the Holocaust, of how the millions were murdered, has been told many times. But their story has never been told. I felt that they deserved that this be done, and that it was up to me to do it.

There was also a specific experience that happened to me in the spring of 1993 that was a catalyst to my decision to reconnect with my past. This consisted of a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington shortly after it opened. Because Safeway contributed a substantial sum toward the establishment of the Museum (and because of my own background), in addition to the normal visit, I had an opportunity to meet some members of the staff, including the person in charge of the archives. She was kind enough to give me access to the microfiche records containing the log of arrivals at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, where I spent three months in the fall of 1944. (I knew there would be no records of my and my family's initial arrival at Auschwitz in June 1944). As the microfiche roll advanced from '41 to '42, and so on to September 1944 –and as the prisoner serial numbers were getting up to over 100,000 – my heart started pounding and I felt that I was entering through doors that I believed were locked forever. When I got to the list of arrivals on September 20, 1944, I knew I would find what I was looking for. When I got to page 261 and saw the entry for prisoner #103,705, Bernat Rosner, I experienced a feeling that was a mixture of shock, poignancy and remembered nightmare that is impossible to describe. It was literally as if I revisited the world of the dead. It was then that I knew that I had to tell my story.

The last noteworthy aspect of my story is that it now appears in the form of a book entitled *An Uncommon Friendship*. The book (published by UC Press in the spring of 2001) is a double memoir of myself, an Auschwitz survivor, and of my friend, Fritz Tubach, who is about the same age as I, and who as a child grew up wartime Germany, the son of a Nazi Officer, and himself a member of the pre-Hitler Youth. We both came to America in our mid-teens and he is as much, if not more, repelled by the horrors of the Nazi era as I am.

August 2002