

Frank Roubicek

Photographed with his wife Hella

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born in Prague, the capital of former Czechoslovakia, on August 11, 1911. I graduated in law from the second oldest university in Europe, the Charles University in Prague, founded in 1348. I served two years in the military and worked only one year in an attorney's office. I lost the job due to anti-Semitic laws, after the country was invaded by the Nazi's in March 1939. Then followed a period of hard labor. First, I myself chose to work in a brick kiln and on construction sites to get physically prepared for the forced labor which was in store for us Jews.

I find it very difficult to condense the four years I spent in various camps. Yet, I shall make an attempt to give you a general idea. To make it conceivable, however, is impossible. It defies the wildest imagination. We in the camps were rendered defenseless right from the beginning. There was no fighting back; we were deprived of human dignity and of the most elemental necessities of life under the worst forms of brutality. Telling this story does not give me a feeling of relief. It brings nightmares and depression. The memories are too painful.

It was in 1941, I believe in September, when my mother and I, and three uncles were ordered to appear at a gathering place in Prague. We were each allowed 50 kilos of personal belongings. This was the prelude to our deportation to the ghetto of Lodz in Poland. There were five transports sent out to Lodz from Prague. Each counted 1,000 persons, a total of 5,000.

The first transport consisted of Jews who were on public subsistence, old people, the sick and disabled. I had the "honor" to be in the second transport, the so-called "Intelligentsia Transport", made up of people with academic backgrounds, such as physicians, lawyers, engineers, etc., along with their families. I understand that out of these 5,000 people, only about 240 returned to Prague after the war.

The Ghetto of Lodz was located in a large area of the city with mostly uninhabitable houses, with raw, exposed flowing sewage. It was essentially a huge work camp with an incredible output of products for the German market, as well as for the war industry. The population varied and at times amounted to as many as 200,000 people. We worked in various factories and to call it slave labor is a gross understatement.

The food rations were minimal; barely enough to survive, and we had to perform hard work during those long hours. Due to lack of hygiene, epidemics broke out, mainly typhus, dysentery and tuberculosis. Besides these diseases, general starvation and suicides were the cause of people's dying in masses.

New transports arrived daily into the ghetto and to make room for the newcomers the Germans were ordering deportations by certain categories. First, the unproductive, such as children, old

people and the sick. Those transports ended in gas chambers in a nearby town. This was how I lost my mother. One uncle died of starvation, another of TB, and the last one was ultimately deported.

The almighty ruler of the ghetto was Chaim Rumkowski, appointed by the Germans as the top administrator. He diligently was carrying out all orders, and took particular care to fulfill the mass deportation quotas. At times they amounted to between 10,000 and 20,000 people. Rumkowski was trying, at the same time, to give the people in the ghetto the impression that he had their interest at heart.

My turn came when the singles were designated for deportation. I was lucky that this transport turned out to be a work transport. I was sent to work in an ammunition factory in Czenstochowa, Poland. It was a reprieve for me, since I was near collapse at this point. More food was available and soon I regained my strength. There were day and night shifts at work, between 12 and 14 hours each. The pressure to achieve the highest output was tremendous and physical abuse was heavy. Severe bodily punishment was the consequence of unsatisfactory production.

The Russian front was getting closer and the day came when the camp was ordered to be evacuated. The electrical workshop where I worked was supposed to go last. When I saw my good friend being lined up across the street from the workshop for deportation loading, I loyally joined him. That was a grave mistake. My friend did not survive eventually and for me the worst part of the war had just begun.

In the meantime, what was left of the camp, including the electrical workshop, was liberated by the Russians the following day. I was shipped in a crowded cattle car to Buchenwald. There we were kept in quarantine three or four weeks. I was assigned to a group cutting trees in the forest – physically very demanding labor.

From Buchenwald the road of destiny took me to Rehmsdorf in Saxony. The camp in Rehmsdorf was the worst of all. We worked in striped prison garb at the BRABAG plant, a huge outdoor plant that used to manufacture synthetic gasoline from brown coal. It had been totally destroyed by bombs and we were working on its reconstruction. The barracks were most primitive. We slept on straw mattresses that were infested with lice and at the same time we were attacked by bed bugs. Needless to say, our nights did not provide the needed rest after days of hard work.

The work place was at least a mile of walking distance away. It was a question of survival to make it to work and back. The food rations amounted to practically nothing - a slice of bread for the whole day, plus a square of margarine. At noon we got the proverbial camp soup – hot water in which turnips had been boiled.

If you could not economize with the slice of bread to last until the end of the day, you could not survive. It meant that you practically only smelled the bread, so to speak, in the morning, and

then you rationed it to last for the rest of the day. If you managed to have a little piece left when going to bed (or rather, visiting the bed bugs), it was the ultimate delight to consume it with closed eyes.

Our work was extremely hard and the guards beat and killed us at their whim if a person was no longer capable of doing the assigned work. I was twice beaten into unconsciousness. Once, by the camp commander during the roll call. After spending a sleepless night with diarrhea, I was unable to stand up. He shouted at me to get up and each time I did he knocked me down until I was left unconscious on the ground. While the crew left for work, I was taken to the improvised hospital, a special barrack where there was hardly any food being passed out. You either died or had to get out after two or three days to make room for those who were lying outside waiting to be admitted.

The camp commander, by the way, was tried and convicted as a war criminal by the tribunal in Dachau after the war. I sent in my testimony.

The second time, I was beaten with a rifle butt by the guard because I was too weak to work. With the help of two friends I made it back to the camp and ended up again in the "hospital" barrack. At that time, I barely escaped the gas chamber when the SS man ordered evacuation of the whole barrack. Thanks to the physician, who was a Czech political prisoner, I was released in the last minute. Before that, I had assisted him in his medical tasks. They consisted mainly of amputations of gangrenous limbs. There were no anesthetics, alcohol was used instead, and paper towels for bandages.

By then, the war was coming to a close. The barracks were practically shaking from detonations of the not-too-distant explosions, and the whole horizon at night looked as if on fire. One night, the camp was evacuated in a hurry. We were loaded onto open freight cars. On the way, the train was bombed and we were shot at by diving American planes. We were obviously mistaken for a military transport. Luckily, I was not among those who were killed. The engines of the train were destroyed, and we were ordered to line up for a march. It was to be one of the so-called "marches of death".

Those who were not capable of walking were shot. During the march, which took at least a week, we just ate what we could get hold of, like garbage, grass etc. At night we were shoved into places like abandoned barns. We just fell down and piled up in layers. Those who ended up on the bottom were found dead in the morning, suffocated.

Marchers who staggered out of the column were shot mercilessly by the guards, who were marching along with rifles in ready positions. Many of the marchers, when they could not move any longer, were kneeling down and with folded hands begging the guards, "Please do not shoot me." The guards had no mercy whatsoever. They simply yelled, "Turn around!" If the marcher turned around, he was shot in the neck. If he did not, he got it in the face. In either event, he then was shoved into the ditch.

I did make it to the destination, which was the ghetto of Theresienstadt, back in Bohemia, north of Prague. It was by sheer will power, there was no physical strength left. I collapsed on arrival and was put on a stretcher.

When people found out that I had been in Lodz – I was probably the first one to return – they surrounded me and asked whether I had come across their parents, relatives, or friends. Among so many faces, I distinguished one. A man bent down and asked, “Have you met, by any chance, my parents in Lodz? My name is Feldstein.” I whispered, “Walter....” His answer was, “Who are you?” This was too much for me. I started crying. He had been one of my schoolmates from college, and he did not recognize me now.

I was taken to the hospital, and this was the beginning of a long stay in many hospitals. My weight by then was 42 kilos. This was around the end of April 1945. The war was coming to an end. The international Red Cross was already in the ghetto. The German troops were in retreat, and soon the Russian army moved in as a liberator.

While being treated for a severe anemia in one of the hospitals in Prague, I acquired a serious case of hepatitis brought on by contaminated liver extract injections. There were doubts about my survival, but after spending many months in hospitals, I regained my health.

Surviving the Holocaust was not just a matter of luck. It was a miracle. After spending many months in hospitals, I returned back to life. My joy in my survival was dampened by the discovery that I was the only one in my family who had stayed alive. My father had died of a heart attack just before the German invasion. My mother died in a gas chamber, my sister, five years older than I, was deported by the Nazis with her husband and two-year old daughter from Slovakia, where they had been living. Where they perished, and when and how, I have never found out. And the question: “WHY?” concerned all of us Jews involved.

When I became capable of working, I held a position in the legal department in one of the branches of the Ministry of Social Welfare in Prague. After the Communist takeover, I focused on a way to get out of the country, and escaped to Vienna in 1951. After a bad year in a refugee camp there, I managed to get a visa to Canada and from there I came to California in 1955.

After years of trial and error, I settled in Berkeley, where I live with my wife Hella. I owned a small retail business in nutritional supplements, from which I retired in 1994. I have two daughters and three grandchildren. The horror years of the wartime taught me how to appreciate the basic values of life and to fully appreciate the good things it has to offer. My family, of course, stands in the foreground.