PART 1: http://www.bjt2006.org/DF_All_I_Remember_0514.pdf
PART 2: http://www.bjt2006.org/DF_All_I_Remember_0814.pdf

This is All I Remember
PART III

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5. AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

Unnatural selection

The shock of the arrival in Birkenau seemed unbearable. The train stopped at dawn, with a small jolt. Before we even had time to come to our senses the doors of the car were pulled open and the SS soldiers were already driving us out, with bestial shouts, cruel blows, and barking dogs. "Los, Los" (come on, come on) they yelled incessantly. A man in prison clothes shouts at us angrily in French: "Why did you come here? Tomorrow you'll leave there!" and he points to the smoke coming from a huge chimney. "We didn't come, we were brought", I answer and I do not believe what he says. But I see that we can't take our luggage along and that the women are separated from the men. In a matter of minutes we are there in front of Mengele: Father, a 56 years old, short, plump man, his hair all white, and Joki and I, young and in good shape. Mengele gestures: Father is to go to the left, the two of us to the right. And then, Father takes his two sons by their arms, and says, decisively, in German: "No. These are my two sons. I am going with them." This process, called selection, took place extremely quickly. There was no time for disputes. And so Father simply came along with us.

What followed lives in my memory like a hellish nightmare. We had to undress completely. They shaved us. Only our eyebrows and eyelashes were left alone. Afterwards we got dressed again and then we were crowded in a small room where thugs in prison clothes, like wild beasts, yelled, beat us ruthlessly, and trampled all over us. The way I remember it is that they walked on people with nail-soled shoes, and that we were pressed so as to form a compact mass, which could be stepped on. Perhaps this is just my imagination, since it is so terrible and unthinkable. But it is a fact that to this day this image is alive in me and I almost feel on my shoulders the traces of the nails of their boots.

Next came the bath. I didn't expect anything but water to come from the pipe because at the time I had not yet heard of the gas chambers disguised as shower rooms but who knows what Father must have felt. After the bath, we were only allowed to keep our shoes, and we got a shirt, underpants, a striped light prison suit and a cap (Mütze).

It was late at night when they crammed us, more than a thousand men, into a lightless barracks, which would normally barely accommodate 200 people. This night lives in me like another nightmare. We were so crowded that not only was it impossible for everybody to sit but it was difficult even to stand. Here there were fights for a sitting place; blows were flying all around.

From our apartment on 16 Eotvös Street in Kolozsvár we were lowered to the ghetto in a day; we were pressed into the cattle cars in an hour, and here we had descended into the Auschwitz-Birkenau hell in a matter of seconds. In twelve days we had sank, from the yellow star-lit 'free' life to where life seemed unbearable. Who would have ever thought that in 12 short hours we would be nostalgic for the 'comfort' of the cattle car? I felt and I knew that their aim was to dehumanize us, that they considered us animals and that they were treating us as such. Here, in the barracks I had the painful experience to see that we did indeed behave like animals.

(Once, on a Sunday afternoon later that summer, I was sitting by myself in the camp, in Magdeburg when a middle-aged man joined me. He had been a baker in Kolozsvár, his name was Landesmann. We started talking. He commented on the ruthless, selfish way in which people fought for even the smallest privileges. "I met only one man" he said. "Somebody who, during our first night, in the crowded barracks, gave me his seat. Do you know who he was? You." I don't remember this moment, and I don't know how he could have recognized me that night, in the barracks, where the only light came from outside somewhere. But it is sure that such behavior is consistent with my inner convictions at the time. I felt it was essential to show to ourselves that we can remain human under any conditions. And the fact that this (could have) happened is the greatest satisfaction of my life.)

I was unwilling to lead this animal-like life. I suggested to Father and Joki not to accept this fate. Not with bitterness or despair but after rational consideration, objectively. Rather than this inhuman life, better a dignified freely chosen death. The electrified barbed wire surrounding the camp offered an easy solution. Father and Joki didn't want it and it is the bitter irony of fate that from the three of us, I alone survived. (In Dr. Victor Frankl's book, "...trotzdem ja zum Leben sagen" I recently read that there were very many who 'ran to the wire'. I didn't know about this. Personally, I don't know of any concrete cases, but it seems very likely to me that it happened.) By myself, I didn't have the courage to commit suicide. But I vowed to myself that I will live only as long as I will be able to stand upright, literally and figuratively.

We spent less than ten days in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We heard of the gas chambers, of the crematorium, of the open pit in which they occasionally burned people who were still alive, not only the already gassed corpses that did no longer have room in the crematorium. Little by little we started believing the unthinkable. I belonged to those who doubted for a long time. I was advised to go out at night, under the pretext of peeing, and sniff the air. At night one could see the flames and the stench of burned flesh and hair was stronger.

Did we actually see it, or did we only infer, that Mother went to the other side, with Aunt Sári? I don't know. But we were sure of it. I remember, our first

barracks were separated from a women's barracks only by a narrow path. Assuming all the risk, I crossed over there once, and I ran inside everywhere desperately shouting Baba's name. I was looking only for Baba, but failed even at that.

After some days we were moved to another barracks, about the size of the first one, but equipped with stacked cots. There were only two hundred of us sleeping here, pressed like herrings, on hay sacks, under blankets. I say we slept in the barracks because during the day we roasted under the strong sun in a small yard between two barracks. In the morning we could wash in a hurry and then we got our terribly small bread and margarine or cold cut ration. The official portion was minimal enough but most of it was stolen by the *Blockälteste* (the block chiefs) and their helpers, the *kapos* and the *Stubendiensts*. As nourishment we also got a warm meal once a day. This slop-like liquid, transported in huge buckets, was called *Dorgemüse*, and we waited for it every day as if it were heavenly manna. Every ten people had one canteen in which a big spoonful of soup was poured. The ten people lined up to sip from the wish-wash. First we were entitled to three gulps each, and we watched, lynx-eyed, one another's Adam's apple to prevent cheating. If there was anything left, more gulps followed. The morning and evening *Appell*, the roll call, was the only thing worse than the daylong idleness in the great heat – there was no shade anywhere. Wretched was the one who crept back into the barracks to rest or who overslept in the morning and did not appear in time for the line up. These people were mauled by the kapos. The kapos in Birkenau were common criminals and virtually without exception they were all sadists. Every line up was accompanied by howls and blows. Then they counted us up. Then they beat us again, especially if the number wasn't right, which, with our illiterate kapos was quite frequent.

The Appell was a daily torture that lasted for hours. The SS only came at the end and counted us up again. Besides filching food and the beatings, the kapos busied themselves with stealing from the convicts whatever valuables they might have still had hidden away. Not that there was much. But several of us had good shoes and, as we were to find out later, this was of the highest value. (In 1939, Mother bought Joki and me a pair of excellent boots each. If only she had bought one for Father too!) It was this footwear that the kapos were bloodthirstily hunting for. The most dangerous thing was to spend much time in the latrine. Because as one sat there, on the boards surrounding the hole, one's feet were visible from the outside. And in this position it wasn't easy to scurry away if the kapo were to grab at your shoes. I don't remember whether the convicts tried to steal shoes from one another. Nor do I remember in what way we defended ourselves against night shoe-robbers. The only thing I know is that both Joki and I left Birkenau in boots.

On June 5, the three of us, Father, Joki and I, left this most horrendous scene of our detention.

What I could never express, and what I haven't seen rendered even roughly anywhere in the literature, with the exception of Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denissovich", is the atmosphere of the Birkenau days: bleak, oppressive, hopeless, pregnant with well known and unknown dangers. This is how an encaged animal must feel.

6. ASCENT FROM HELL
(Buchenwald)

It felt like a deliverance to get, fifty of us, in a cattle car, dressed in light prison clothes and supplied with a tiny bit of food. Indeed, it was as if one ascended from hell. After a trip of about twenty hours we arrived in Buchenwald at dawn, on June 6th. It was still dark.

We didn't even guess yet what great luck it was to get, of all the dispersion camps, precisely to Buchenwald. But we were immediately struck by the friendly way we were addressed by the Czech prisoner (a camp policeman) who took us over. And what he said thrilled us all: "The Allies have landed in Normandy."

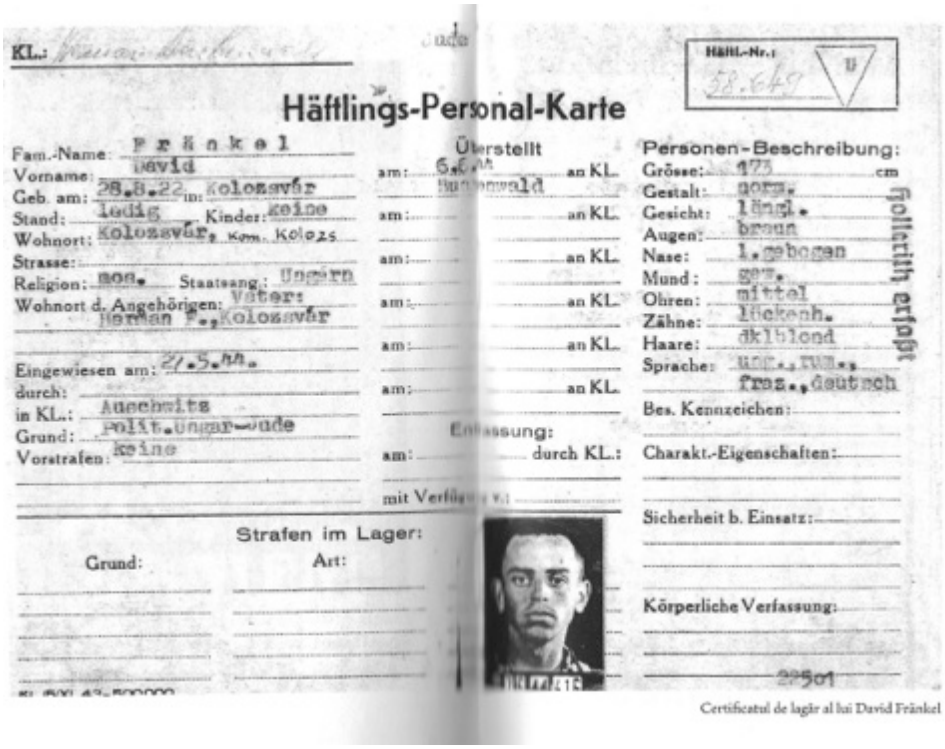
What is this? Where are we? Where have we been taken?

Buchenwald, we found out later, was one of the first concentration camps in Hitler's Germany. This is where they sent, at the end of the thirties, the political prisoners, primarily the communists and the socialists but also the members of the religious sects that opposed bloodshed. A significant number of the convicts were homosexuals or common criminals: murderers and burglars. At the beginning, the SS entrusted the common criminals with the internal organization of the camp and the conditions were dreadful: the SS and the Kapo thieves tortured and worked the convicts to death. After the breakout of the war, at the end of a long struggle, the politicals took over the internal control of the camp. This suited the SS and the Gestapo too because as a result, the camp was put in order and thus, they were better able to meet the needs of the war economy by organizing external work units.

While in Auschwitz-Birkenau the kapos killed, stole and murdered, here peace and quiet reigned. Only those were punished – severely – who stole. We found out here that in Birkenau about eight tenths of the official food ration was stolen from us.

The miracle the communists were able to perform within the Nazi concentration camp was unbelievable and uplifting. I, who for years had sympathized with the communists and had tried to get in contact with them, was looking around in amazement. And I thought: How much more the communists would be able to do if they took power in a free country, if such results have been reached here! It is a bitter irony of fate that, after the war, I saw how the communists transformed the countries where they did seize power into veritable concentration camps. But in Buchenwald then I didn't see any trace of this danger. Only when, a few years ago, I read Semprun's book about Buchenwald, "Quel beau dimanche", did I realize that his Buchenwald was very different from mine. As a leading communist he enjoyed extraordinary privileges. The seeds of the Nomenklatura existed already there. But at the time, we saw and enjoyed only the advantages of a camp run internally by the communists.

They treated us like humans from the first day, when file cards were set up, containing information about us: name of father and mother, date and place of birth, shape of face, color of eyes, height, the date and reason of arrest etc. It was here that I got the number I became: 58649. From then on a small triangular yellow piece of cloth with a U on it showed that I was a Hungarian Jew; my number was displayed on a small rectangular piece of cloth. Yes, it is terrible that instead of a name I was designated by a number and any time I reported somewhere I had to say this number. But in Birkenau we had not even had this much. There I was one of the many, not a specific individual. And, crucially, here they not only numbered us, they also took account of us. Somewhere there was a trace of what 58649 designated. After liberation I found this file card and I have preserved it to this day.


KL.:

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Häftl.-Nr.: 58.649 U

Fam.-Name: Fränkel
Vorname: David
Geb. am: 28.8.22 in: Kolozsvár
Stand: ledig Kinder: keine
Wohnort: Kolozsvár, Kom. Kolozs
Strasse:
Religion: mos. Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: Vater: Herman F., Kolozsvár

Eingewiesen am: 27.5.44.
durch:
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: polit.ungar-jude
Vorstrafen: keine

Überstellt
am: 6.44 an KL. Buchenwald
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.

Entlassung:
am: durch KL.:
mit Verfügung v.:

Strafen im Lager:
Grund: Art:

Personen-Beschreibung:
Grösse: 175 cm
Gestalt: norm.
Gesicht: längl.
Augen: braun
Nase: l.gebogen
Mund: ger.
Ohren: mittel
Zähne: lückenh.
Haare: dklblond
Sprache: ung., rum., frz., deutsch
Bes. Kennzeichen:
Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
Körperliche Verfassung:

Hollerith erfaßt

Certificatul de lagăr al lui David Fränkel

It was easy to discover who the communists in a transport were. On the night of our arrival they found out who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. (In our group it was Gyuri Adorján, as far as I know). Through them they got to the other communists and it was from among the communists, or based on their recommendation, that the 'officers' were chosen: Blockälteste, kapo, Stubendienst. And here these officers were honest, law-abiding officials. This 'personnel investigation' was obviously not perfect but it was the only possible one. Of course, people's subsequent behavior was watched. But it was unavoidable that some passed as communists or as trustworthy although they were not, and that some became corrupted. Soon we experienced this on our own backs, painfully.

Buchenwald was very crowded in the summer of 1944. The convicts lived in several two storeyed brick buildings and in many wooden one storeyed barracks. We didn't get into either. For us they set up a so-called *Zeltlager* (tent camp). I seem to remember that each huge tent housed about a hundred convicts. I remember precisely that, while sitting on the latrine, I again mused about the fact that now indeed there was total equality among people, and wondered how this micro-society will behave. Of course I myself smiled sarcastically when I attributed some sort of socialist character to this state of affairs.

The daily routine was simple: reveille, the making of beds, washing up, Appell (relatively quick and blow-free), coffee and distribution of food. Idleness. Lunch, which was quite different from the next to nothing they gave us in Birkenau. Here the plateful of food was always consistent. Again leisure. Evening Appell. Those who left some food for the night could have dinner, and if you wanted to, you could wash again. Bedtime. During the day there was a special lining up in front of the 'barber' to get shaved.

I had the opportunity to observe at close range the danger of corruption. In every tent they named six Stubendiensts. Somebody must have deemed me honest because I was one of the six in our tent. Our task was to keep the tent neat and clean and to take over and distribute the daily food. The margarine and the cold cuts were measured out. The bread on the other hand had to be broken into three. But the loaves were not of equal size. My companions suggested that we should pick the two largest loaves for ourselves. I opposed this strongly and as a result we too got our loaves at random. I knew how important this was in principle and I was pleased that I had managed to convince my five companions not to give in to the temptation of corruption. Aside from the Stubendiensts, only the barber was in a privileged situation. A scum by the name of Kupferstein from Várad enlisted as barber. (In Magdeburg he became the translator and he behaved disgracefully.) I tried to keep a close eye on him because I saw that, in exchange for food, he took people out of turn. Once, I remember, I went over to Father while he was being shaved, and from our conversation, it became obvious that I was his son. At which Kupferstein cried out: "Why didn't you say so before!

Now I see you don't let me be because I don’t give special treatment to your father. But this is quite easy to arrange!” He was dumbfounded when I explained that I wanted him not to give special treatment to anyone, including my father. We are equal enough in our misery; everybody should keep his turn.

From the data I obtained in 1987, (when my wife, Eszter, and I fled Romania to Germany) from the Red Cross it can be seen that they kept precise tabs on the fate of us, ‘numbers’, and so I know that we spent there 11 days in all. From this period I remember only a single unusual event. In the barracks that were neighboring the Zeltlager were imprisoned the members of the Copenhagen police. They wore civilian clothes and were young, springy, and disciplined. They got special food and Red Cross parcels. We were still there when they were put in Red Cross cars and transported back to life, from where they had been snatched because of failure to obey Nazi orders. Therefore their camp life could not have been longer than ten days. And still, a large number of them died. It remained a mystery to us why they “fell like flies”, as was put there. They probably could not stand the atmosphere of the camp, that ungraspable something, which I cannot describe but whose oppressive, tormenting effect I still feel now when I think back.

On June 16th they organized an external work unit. Our friends advised us to try to get into it because the conditions were supposed to be very good and because the ‘cadres’ (Lagerälteste, kapos) sent along with the 2000 or so workers were excellent people.

All three of us were ‘successful’ in getting into this work kommando, which was sent to Magdeburg on June 17th. We already felt at home in the cattle cars and we were glad that, for this trip of a few hours only, we had been given several times the food rations that we had left Birkenau with.