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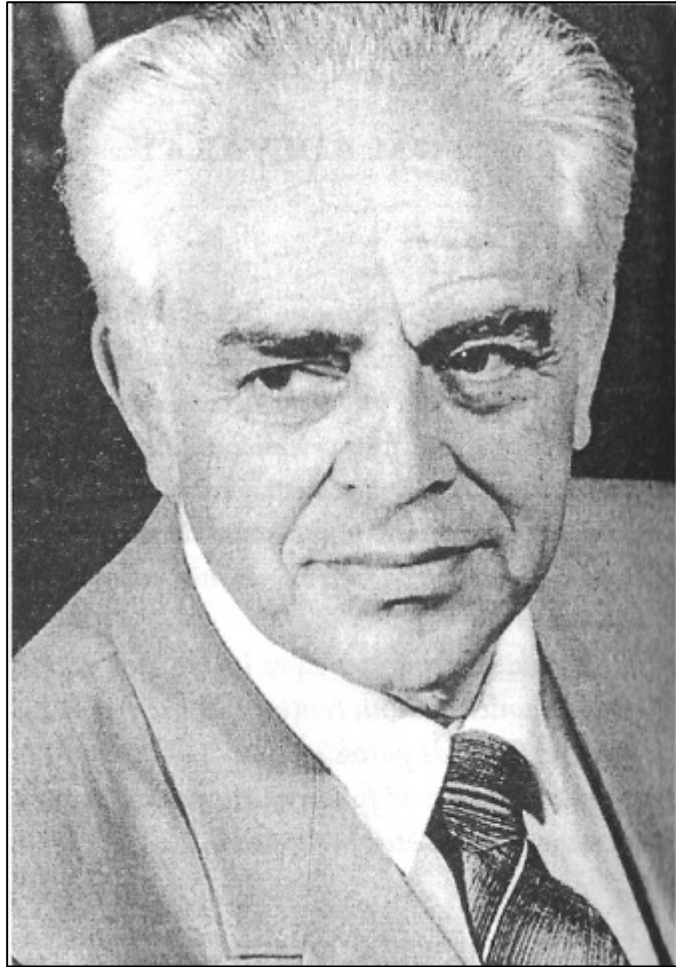
This is All I Remember

PART IV

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7. MAGDEBURG

The camp lay at the outskirts of the city and was surrounded by barbed wire. In the thirty wooden barracks or so, wooden stacked beds. For the first time, everybody had his own bed, hay sack, hay filled pillow and blanket. The food: in the morning, a dark slop made of ersatzcoffee, a little bread, a piece of margarine or cold cut; at lunch, a thin soup with occasional traces of meat. In the evening, the dark slop again. With this many calories one couldn't last long even staying idle. But we worked hard: clearing rubble, and building a railroad and an air raid shelter.

Reveille at 5:30am. Appel. The row of convicts, divided into work units, started at 7am on the approximately five km road leading to our place of work, a synthetic gas factory called Brabag. After 10 hours of hard labor and frequent beatings, the tortured, exhausted, drained people had to stand for Appel again, for hours. The Appel was the scene and the time of the refined torture inflicted by the SS camp commander. It was the most dreadful part of the day. It was already dark by the time we could go wash and then lie down.

Every day and every night there were air raid warnings, and often bombings as well. In the immediate vicinity of the camp anti-aircraft units were set up. They thought perhaps that the camp provided them with some measure of protection. When the bombers appeared in daytime --shiny white dots in the sky-- we were driven out running, on the fields surrounding the factory. We were driven out because the kapos and the SS were terribly frightened. During the night we trembled through the attack under our respective beds.

It soon became obvious that the 'personnel' people back in Buchenwald had made serious mistakes when choosing the cadres. The Lagerälteste was a red-squared political prisoner but he had a single aim: to gather enough money from filching food and cigarettes to engineer his own escape. (He eventually succeeded in this.) Most of the kapos were common criminals but all of them behaved like wild beasts. They didn't have to work and they had plenty of food. They defended these privileges at any cost. They struck us and beat us up to prove their effectiveness. But beyond this, a large number of them must have been sadists. Or perhaps one becomes a sadist when one rules over life and death, and the blood that irrupts after a blow inebriates instead of frightening one away.

Our life was threatened by starvation, murderous blows, and bombs, and was filled by our endless attempts at somehow defending ourselves against these dangers.

First of all we tried to get lighter, better work. Our aim was not to thereby weaken Hitler's Germany, but rather, to delay our physical decay. We had to try to get into a 'better' work unit. The quality of a unit depended on the type of work and on who the kapo was.

One of the jobs was the clearing of rubble: for 10 hours we had to clear away the remains of reinforced concrete walls, using drills and pickaxes. This work was both hard and dangerous. Its only advantage was that the kapo and the Todt Vorarbeiter (the work leader) kept a respectable distance, from which they could yell but they couldn't hit. I remember that I was entrusted with the responsibility of leading the work of a small group. After a few minutes I realized, to my horror, that I was paying attention to the efficiency of the work process rather than to how to save our strengths. I immediately changed the 'style'. Today this episode reminds me of the 'Kohn from the Gestapo' joke.¹

Another job was the building of a railroad. We had to carry, at a quick pace, the rails and ties, and we had to pickaxe the gravel under the ties. The pace was killing and the blows terrible. After liberation, I saw the well-fed German workers build a railroad between Buchenwald and Weimar. The rail, which three of us used to carry with our bare hands and running, was carried by six of them, at a comfortable pace. They were holding it with some special pincers, wearing gloves. Luckily Father had to carry only ties. Both of us were carrying them but so as to have all the weight on me.

We also built reinforced concrete air raid shelters: digging ditches, mixing casting cement etc. Connected to this there was a small unit that worked on a tugboat transporting sand and gravel on the Elba canal. The sand was taken out of the boat by a crane and the job was to shovel the sand in its way. There were eight to ten people in this group, which was too small to have a kapo or an SS guard and anyway, the work rhythm was dictated by the crane. This was an ideal work place also because occasionally one got to chat with the sailor on the boat. (I will never forget one such conversation. The sailor asked me why we were held prisoners. When, in answer to his question, I told him the story of our deportation he was filled with such intense anger as I have never seen before. Shaking his fist and trembling with rage he said: "We will show this butcher a thing or two!" It felt very good. From this spontaneous reaction one can conclude that there must have been many who were not aware of the liquidation of the Jews if this man, who had been working by our side for weeks, had no idea about it.) Joki managed to place himself into this unit from the first days. A further advantage of this unit was that it was relatively stable, that is, it was made up by the same people, and so one didn't have to strive every day to get into it. And, furthermore, it was at the head of the column marching to work. Joki insisted

¹ Kohn is taken in to the Gestapo and is beaten up dreadfully. He is left alone in the room in a pool of blood. The phone starts ringing. He manages to get to it, picks it up, and says, with authority: 'Hello! Kohn from the Gestapo speaking.'

that I should go there too. But Father was not able to 'position' himself as easily as we were. For that you had to be particularly on the ball and very mobile. And I had decided to stay with Father at any cost, to help whenever possible. And sometimes I was indeed able to. The greatest help was the exchange of shoes. He put on my boots and I wore his worn-out walking shoes. (This is why, when a rail fell on my right heel it caused a serious bruise that healed only after liberation.) Father and I switched work units daily until he was taken back to Buchenwald, completely exhausted and barely able to walk on his swollen feet.

The memory of our parting is excruciatingly painful. We are lined up. Father is standing in front of me. He has lost weight and I can see, looking at his child-like neck and shrunken shoulders, that he is sobbing. I saw Father cry only once before. He was wiping tears from his eyes when Uncle Jozsi, my cousins' father, died. Now here he is sobbing, in front of me. What is he thinking about? That he will never see us again? That perhaps he is taken to Auschwitz and not to Buchenwald? (Although with this particular group there were no such rumors.) Or perhaps, in his religious soul, the question that he asked repeatedly in the camp rings out painfully again: "God Almighty, why are you striking the good?" Father is crying; his whole body is shaking with sobs he is unable to hold back. Tears are streaming from his eyes. I have seen him again only in my dreams. But, oh, how vividly! When, in September, we got back to Buchenwald I found out that our hope of his getting into the Revier (hospital) did not come true. (It was because of this hope that we had switched back our footwear before he left.) Father worked in a quarry, and, when English bombers attacked the area around Buchenwald on August 24, 1944 (they must have known that V2 parts were being manufactured there), a bomb fell on that quarry. Father was hit by a flying stone. He died of his injuries. Perhaps death was a deliverance to him. Who knows how much more suffering would he have had to endure? Perhaps. But it is also possible that he could have somehow come along with me later to Niederorschel. I cannot forgive myself for letting him go away in his walking shoes. Perhaps if he is wearing boots he is able to run and is not hit by the flying stone? There is so much in my life that causes me pain; things I did though I shouldn't have, and things I didn't do though I should have. Those boots that ended up on my feet again and not on his are hurting my heart today. Would his life have been saved, would I have perished? Who knows? But the thought hurts me. It hurts me very much and very often.

After Father's departure Joki insisted more energetically that I should join his unusually good work unit. To this day I smile ironically, though with sympathy, at my answer: "I would commit a grave injustice if I were always in this good unit because this would mean that somebody else is never in it." I am looking back at myself with sympathy because there, where everybody fought hard for minimal privileges, I was able to turn down, on matters of principle, such a life-saving offer for several days. The irony is there because of the fact that I was

able to do this only for a few days. Luckily. Because surely it was to my advantage that I worked there for almost two months, but it is unquestionable that without my presence Joki would not have lived to be liberated. He became sick with tubercular pleurisy after I joined him, and his health grew progressively worse. One had to report to the Revier in the evening, after work, and, to his bad luck, at that time he had no fever. Without a fever he was slapped rather than put to bed by the doctor. But in the mornings his fever was high; he couldn't even walk by himself. This is why it was divine luck that we were together. At the beginning I could support him on our way to work and later I literally carried him. Once at the boat, we laid him down and did his share of work too until, at the beginning of September, he had a fever in the evening as well and so could finally get into the Revier. (The Revier started out as a small area in one of the wooden barracks but later the number of the sick grew so much that they had to put up several tents for them.)

And then, we tried to get some extra food though there was hardly any opportunity for that. Very rarely it happened that we got our cigarette portion. Then we could exchange it for bread with the outside workers. Joki and I did that. There was another faint hope: if, during an air raid, we were taken to an agricultural land, we sometimes chanced upon a potato or a turnip. But this was a very rare occurrence. Once --and how vividly I remember it!--the sailor on one of the boats gave me a tomato. Even today I feel its unearthly marvelous taste. Again, just like when, in Buchenwald, I ate the first lentil dish breakfast the morning after our arrival, I almost fainted. But Joki and I stumbled upon a stable source of food that was probably life-saving. There worked in the kitchen a handsome, red cheeked young man, who was always in a good mood. We called him Lipi. This 'saving angel' often materialized in the evenings and, from under his apron, he conjured up potatoes; boiled potatoes. It was like a fairy tale. He didn't steal from the prisoners but from the SS kitchen. He risked enormously. If he had been caught he would have been mauled, or perhaps even killed. But in any event they would have thrown him out of the kitchen, which would have been his end anyway, because he was sick. (In the fall of 1945 I ran into him on the main square in Kolozsvár. He invited me to his place, in Regen, if I remember correctly, where he practiced dentistry, so that I could study in peace and quiet for the entrance exam to the Engineering School. In 1988 I visited Israel. He heard about it and looked me up. He looked very well and things seemed to be going wonderfully for him. I asked him what made him risk that much for us, whom he didn't even know from before. He said that it was us who took the risk when we distributed the potatoes to others, whom he named. I don't remember having done that. I also don't remember how substantial the portion we received from him was. But whatever it was, I am not exaggerating when I consider it life-saving. Lipót Baumzweig is the name of this excellent man.

The miracle that happened to Dr. Ernő Ligeti (the composer, György Ligeti's father) has no pair: he received a food parcel from a German acquaintance. How he managed to let that person know where he was, how this acquaintance dared to send a parcel, and how this parcel got to him, all this is a mystery. And it wasn't envy that stirred up the atmosphere of the camp when the news reached us; it was the whiff of civilian life that people were struck by.

Finally, we did everything to avoid being hit. The beatings could mean immediate death: the wretched prisoner was struck with sticks, or the specially trained bloodhounds were unleashed on him, until he died then and there. Or they 'only' maimed you. There were beatings that merely caused physical pain. But beyond, and perhaps above, everything else, the mere fact that anytime they could kick or slap you while you had to endure it helplessly, whining in silence, was unbearably humiliating. They beat you if, worn out, you overslept and did not show up at the Appel, they beat you if, back from work, they found as much as a single potato on you. They beat you to line you up in lines of ten (although it was precisely the fear of beatings that made the lining up more difficult), and then they just beat away at you for no reason at all.

To avoid being beaten you had to have a good nose, and you had to be circumspect, precautious, quick at making decisions and very mobile. And if you were successful the satisfaction that you had outwitted the brutes was the most important thing. I was pretty good at it. I was 'caught' only once. The slap I got from the kapo sent me down into the meter and a half deep ditch I was standing near. The cause of the affair was semantic. There were two of us working at carrying away the dirt dug up from the ditch. I was shoveling the dirt into the mine wagon and my companion pushed it several hundred meters away. Till he came back I stood idle, waiting. In one of these idle moments the kapo materialized at my side and barked at me asking why I wasn't working. I answered in German, saying that it was he who had organized the work in such a way that the shoveler had to wait till the mine wagon was pushed back. There would have been no problem if, instead of the German word for 'mine wagon' (Lore), I hadn't used the Hungarian word (csille). If one's German was broken one could easily get one's neck broken as well. I was amazingly lucky not to get injured then.

(Let me mention here that I had another such lucky fall. I was already working on the tugboat then. When it was filled with sand it sank deeply into the water and so we had to climb up to the shore about three meters on an iron ladder. Now I happened to be in the lucky and happy position of possessing a liter bottle in which I could bring water along. This was an invaluable treasure that I took better care of than of myself. I was holding it between my index and my thumb, grasping the rungs of the iron ladder with the other three fingers. I had reached the last rung when I missed and plunged, back forward, onto the ship. Joki, who was just about to start his climb behind me, hardly had time to

jump aside. Later he told me he had thought that the SS guard was throwing a cement sack on him. The bottom of the 'sack' hit first the crossbeam of the little ship and from there, head first, into the sand. I then got up, felt no pain, and climbed back up the ladder. Only my heart hurt because of the broken bottle.)

Usually, it was the kapos who did the beating but the SS were not idle either. Father spoke perfect, beautiful German. I don't know how it happened but he struck up a conversation once with a brutish SS sergeant. I don't even know what they said to one another. But from then on the SS struck and beat my father any time he saw him. I remember, we were digging the very ditch I fell into later. Father was shoveling the earth from the bottom of the ditch and I was pick axing it a few steps above. The SS soldier was standing by Father, beating him. There was a moment that lives in me vividly, when my arm was about to swing to split the SS's head into two with my pick axe. Why didn't I do it? My cowardice must have been stronger than this impulse. Luckily we soon were taken out of the sight of this particular SS soldier.

The evening beatings were the most dreadful. In front of the people gathered for the Appel, they unleashed bloodhounds on the prisoners they had caught, for hours on end. They searched us on our way back from work at random and it was enough to be found with a single potato to be declared guilty. The 2000 people were lined up there and watched and heard how the SS unleashed the bloodhounds and the prisoner, amid demented shouts, lit by searchlights, fought in death's throes. There was a particularly horrible evening. It followed the night during which Allied bombers wrought enormous damage on Magdeburg. (When, at the beginning of the seventies, I was in Magdeburg on an official visit at the Engineering School, this bombing was still often brought up in conversation.) Next evening, when we came back from work, we were presented with an exhibit: hammers and knives were displayed on tables. Shoemakers and tailors, who knows by what sacrifices and ingenuity, had managed to acquire these indispensable tools. The SS camp commander was running up and down like a madman, shouting that what we were seeing were the weapons of a planned revolt. The 'culprits' were dragged out and then a massacre started that lasted till dawn.

These killings in front of the lined up population of the camp were more than just demoralizing and frightening. One felt as if every blow struck oneself, as if the dogs' every bite was into one's own flesh, as if the victims' blood-curdling shrieks were coming out of one's own throat. I realized quite early what their shrewd purpose was: they didn't only want to set up an example. Their aim was to strike down with one blow on two thousand people. I decided not to go along. I am not there, I thought, I don't see or hear anything. No, this wasn't at all the apathy, the disinterestedness, which, according to Frankl's book, took hold of many prisoners. This was a conscious defensive maneuver that required intense concentration. And I was often able to carry it through.

I remember that the morning after this massacre, when Joki and I were marching at the edge of the first line, a Wehrmacht guard stepped close to us and said indignantly: "We saw everything. You can rest assured. We will take care of this SS Sturmbahnführer." They couldn't do anything, of course, but it nevertheless felt good that they thought of it.

There was no defense against the bombings, of course. The day after our arrival we had to clear away the last traces of a previous bombing so that production could be resumed in a few days. The prisoners were working on a well delimited small area when a massive bomb attack reduced the factory to rubble in a matter of minutes. The prisoners were under carpet bombing but the SS guards and the kapos did not let them into the shelter. There were many dead and injured. Joki jumped into a ditch, landing on the people already in there; others jumped on him. The one below him and the one above died on the spot. He escaped unharmed but from then on he felt such terrible fear each time there was an air raid that his whole body shook. I was amazingly lucky. As an 'electrician' I had stayed behind in the camp that day to finish putting the voltage into the barbed wire. I didn't live through that terrible experience and so I didn't become terrified by bombings. Quite the contrary. I mentioned already that there was some anti-aircraft near our barracks. These were shooting at the bombers every night, making the barracks shake and the windows vibrate; the majority of the prisoners hid under the beds for part of the night. I did not wake up a single night. Luckily, I had an unusually good autonomous nervous system. There were air raids during the day as well. Once we ran out into the fields with a kapo famous for his nose. We settled under a spreading oak tree. (It was here that I found a scrap of newspaper from which I learned that Romania had turned against the Germans.) After a few minutes, the kapo jumped to his feet and led us away at breakneck speed. When we came back the oak was no longer there; we only saw its remnants deep in a bomb crater. "You scamper, you are scared, you wretched lot!" I said to myself, thinking of the kapos and the SS guards. I was not afraid. Perhaps also because I didn't have the slightest desire to live that life. If we were not on plow-land, where we searched for food, I lay down, covered my head with my canteen, and fell instantly asleep. It happened that bombs were falling close to us and I was snoozing away. Luckily, I never woke up to find out that one of them had fallen on me.

I must mention something else which helped us a lot. Every evening, without exception, Joki and I went into the empty lavatory after the Appel, late at night, and washed from head to toe.

Obviously we were still in good enough shape to have energy for this but the opposite is also true: this ritual act contributed to our physical and spiritual well-being.

This was so because this regular and thorough washing was the only thing that connected us to our former free life. Apart from occasional glimpses of a tram. How unreal it seemed, and what painful nostalgia it caused! Aside from this there are only two moments in my memory that brought back something from civilian existence. It is night. We are working on bunkers by the Elba canal. I am shoveling. My Slovakian fellow convict is teaching me arias under the starlit sky: "Le ciel etait plein d'étoiles ...". The other: after work, on my way home, I see the wheat fields undulating in the evening breeze. This is all, and I am filled with an exceptional, sweet feeling.

One evening the camp was filled with excitement. The rumor spread that the Lagerälteste had escaped. Soon afterwards, the brutish SS camp commander disappeared as well. (When I got back to Buchenwald I was given the amazing satisfaction of seeing him there, with the other SS, on the daily walk allowed to the SS condemned to concentration camp[.]) I never learned what had happened. He probably stole together with the Lagerälteste and he was punished because he thereby contributed to the latter's escape. The new camp commander was a retired air force officer and we were stunned to see that he came into the barracks, talked to the prisoners and heard out their complaints.

I don't know what happened later in Magdeburg. The population of the camp had shrunk to half and 300 people were laying in the Revier unable to work. Joki among them. Dr. Béla Neufeld, a famous Hungarian psychiatrist from Prague, who examined Joki, told me that his case was hopeless. The rumor spread that the 300 people will be taken to the gas chambers of AuSchwitz, by way of Buchenwald. Without hesitation I tried to get in among them and I succeeded. Everybody tried to dissuade me vehemently but I couldn't leave Joki alone.

This is how we got back to Buchenwald on September 28th, and there the news of our father's death reached us.