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

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

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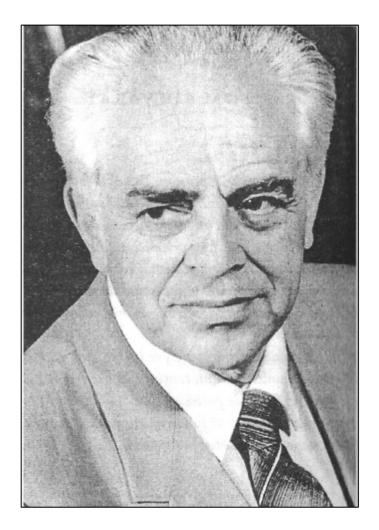
PART 4: <u>http://www.bjt2006.org/DF_All_I_Remember_1414.pdf</u>

This is All I Remember PART V

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8. BUCHENWALD REVISITED

Upon our arrival in Buchenwald I was approached by Gabi Hirsch (after the war he held a high position in Bucharest under the name of Gabriel Muresan). He reprimanded me for having 'dealt in' bread, as he put it, in Magdeburg. I, for one, didn't see what harm there was in exchanging those few cigarettes I got for bread but I was already in that strange frame of mind which made me blame myself anytime I did not agree with what the communists said and I believed Gabi to be one of them. The memory of my successful fight against corruption in the Zeltlager must have been still fresh, so I was pardoned and entrusted with the task of translator. I was told that our group was being sent to Auschwitz and my orders were to personally let everybody know this and to do my best to persuade people to declare themselves fit for work, and try to somehow pass the medical exam and enlist for any work unit being organized, because the alternative is death. Those were the most dreadful nine days of my camp life. We were crowded into one of the barracks near the Zeltlager, one of those in which, three months before, the policemen from Copenhagen died at such incomprehensible speed. What was horrible was that I could not persuade people to report for work. Few believed that they were indeed being sent to Auschwitz but even those who did said (and to this day it is terrible to remember their paralyzed indifference): "It's all the same to me. Whatever happens, I can't work any longer." The image of one man in particular stays with me with cruel clarity. Formerly he was the *shames* (attendant) of the conservative temple in Kolozsvár. Only his head was recognizable now. His otherwise tiny body had shrunk to nothing but skin and bones. By now he could only crawl on the barracks floor and he imploringly asked everybody not for bread, no, but for cigarettes.

I learned later that the group did not make it to Auschwitz. They piled people on top of one another in open cars. They pulled the cars back and forth between Buchenwald and Weimar till they all froze or starved.

Joki and I reported for work. Joki was in terrible shape but he made it through the medical exam nonetheless thanks to his robustness. We were both assigned to the same transport, bound for Niederorschel. This was rumored to be very good. But hadn't they said the same thing about Magdeburg as well? Meanwhile Béla Neufeld explained to me that Joki won't even survive the trip; he has to be gotten into the Revier. It was common knowledge that the Revier in Buchenwald was a real hospital. I started running around like a madman but we were separated from the Revier by an iron fence. I don't know how it happened but eventually I managed to speak, through the fence, to a French doctor who was very well-intentioned, and Joki was taken into the Revier. He won't survive there either, Dr. Neufeld prophesized, but for him this is the best solution anyway. I set out for Niederorschel alone, convinced that I had said good-bye to Joki forever.

9. NIEDERORSCHEL

There is no such animal¹. I have heard of many labor camps from survivors but all were incomparably worse than the one I got into in Niederorschel. Those former inmates to whom I talked about it listened to me dumbfounded, almost incredulous.

Everything was extraordinary here: the brick building of the airplane wing factory in which we worked was three minutes away from the brick building in which we lived, each in his own bed, and there was warm and cold water in the lavatory. The only kapo (a German communist) defended the rights of the prisoners steadfastly, with admirable courage, and guite successfully, and he never struck anybody. We got the full portion of food and cigarettes and the dishes produced by the ingenious Czech cook were tasty. His main number was the Grenadiermarsch. The Appel took place in a civilized fashion and was over in 5 to 10 minutes. Most of the prisoners were Hungarian Jews but there were quite a few French maquisards, Czech resistance fighters and Russian war prisoners as well. Using pneumatic hammers, we had to rivet together the precut aluminum plates needed for the wings (this was the hardest job), and to equip the feet and wings with electric installations (this could be done relatively comfortably). The work rhythm was not exaggerated and, on top of it, the frequent power cuts and the not infrequent air-raids provided extra breaks. (The air-raid, if it came before noon, was a positively happy event for me: I had no faith whatsoever in my survival, of course, but as a preventive measure against stomach ulcers, I always saved half the morning bread ratio for lunch, and when the sirens went on, I quickly ate it; it is not healthy, you see, to die on an empty stomach.) The French doctor treated the patients ably and conscientiously and occasionally he even disposed of some medication. An SS dentist came monthly from Buchenwald, and he treated the teeth of the prisoners as well.

True, the food was barely enough to keep us alive and we were tormented by continuous hunger; the ten hour work day went beyond the powers of many of us and some work leaders were rude; despite the daily washing, nobody could avoid the endless fight against lice. But the fact that very few of us died during those 6 months is due to the good conditions in this camp.

¹ Two peasants from an isolated village come to the capital and go to visit the Zoo. In front of the cage holding the zebra, one of them shakes his head and says to the other: "There is no such animal."

I worked on the electric fitting of airplane wings. Leaning into the wing from above or from below I installed condensers, small signaling lights and electric wires. My only tool was a screwdriver. I didn't find the work trying in the least. And I was sometimes positively sorry that the walk to the factory was so short. The snow was creaking under my boots that were still in good condition, and a paper bag under my prison jacket shielded me from the bitter cold. I enjoyed this short walk the way I did, long before, in Magdeburg, the undulating wheat fields.

Everybody had a hobby. I don't remember by what miracle, I lay hands on pencil and paper. I immersed myself in 'work' in two areas: I wrote down every poem I could remember, but mostly, I solved math problems. I had a French movie director colleague who translated into French my literal renditions of the poems by Attilla József. He lasted only for a short while. The movie director stole food and that was punished severely. He disappeared; perhaps he was sent back to Buchenwald. With math, I was more successful. I did more than just solve problems. For instance I 'discovered' -- and I was very proud of this (groundlessly, by the way)-- that the analytic geometry I knew from high school is generalizable to the space as well (which is common knowledge for a mathematician). I even had some direct advantage from doing mathematics. Once I noticed, frightened, that my rude work leader, a wounded air force officer who made everybody tremble, was standing behind me, watching how I pretend to be working, bent over the airplane wing, while in fact I busy myself with some calculations, and all this was undeniably proven by my scrap of paper. "What are you doing here?", he barked at me angrily. "Höhere Mathematik (higher mathematics)", I answered and savored the unexpected effect. He looked into my notes and said nothing but from then on I could do whatever I wanted; he never again had any hard words with me. And I took full advantage of this freedom. I had for instance a companion, a friend, by the name of Andor Havas. One of his legs was crippled from birth and he could walk, limping, only with the help of some device. He himself didn't know by what miracle he managed to preserve this device through Birkenau. Before, he had planned to be an engineer. None of us believed that we will live to be liberated but we often talked, masochistically, of his engineering and my medical dreams. During power breaks we would climb on two adjacent ladders --the work leader let me away with this too-- and we would plan our futures. We laughed with pity at ourselves, as we stood there in the dark and, from our even darker souls, we projected unattainable, luminous images. And then, a new miracle occurred. Around December a group of Hungarian Jews arrived in the camp, some of those who had been driven on foot from Budapest to Germany. Among them was the former chief engineer of the MAV [Hungarian Railroads], a middle-aged, excellently trained man, of steely constitution. He offered to teach us higher mathematics in the evenings. Andor and I seized the opportunity happily, and so, after dinner, with empty stomachs, defending ourselves from the piercing cold with blankets secretly hidden under our prison jackets, we followed with great attention the elegant lectures of our teacher, and tried to solve the problems he gave us, in the empty meeting room. Did this state that drove away hunger, shivering and hopelessness last weeks or months? I do not remember when it was that our teacher died. I don't even know his name. Although it was he who lifted us to him, to the human level of existence and beyond!

As it happened, Andor was liberated too. We met again in the fall of 1945 in Kolozsvár and traveled together to Temesvár to take the university entrance examinations: he to the medical school, because he had meanwhile realized that engineering was not for him, and I to Engineering School, because I had realized that I was not cut out for the medical profession.

I would like to tell now a few stories about our kapo.

For instance: On the first working day we came home from the factory on our lunch break to get our canteenful of warm food. The distribution of the food lasted longer than the break. The SS camp commander, an elderly angry captain, roared to the kapo when the break was over, to immediately send everybody back to the factory. The kapo, in his strong, melodious voice (it was obvious that he himself enjoyed listening to it) answered in a way that did not allow for contradiction: "No, only those are going back who have already eaten; the others will be a little late." The captain, whose face grew crimson, said nothing. From that day on, the conflict was solved by having us eat the warm meal in the evening, sitting comfortably by the long wooden table in the dormitory.

Or: I mentioned already that the Appel was over very quickly: in two minutes we were lined up, in another two minutes the kapo counted us, the captain showed up, and then came the kapo's shrill shout: "Stillenstand! Mützen ab. Ich melde gehörsam 800 Häftlinge angetreten." (Attention! Caps off! I respectfully report that 800 prisoners are lined up.) The captain counted us for two more minutes after which we were dismissed by the kapo. It is impossible to say what a deliverance this was. Well, in the first week of November it became chilly. At the usual evening Appel we heard, amazed, the kapo's melodious voice: "Stillenstand. Ich melde gehörsam..." The SS captain, beside himself, interrupts, shouting: "Mützen ab", at which the kapo answers, in a stentorial tone: "Nein. Es ist Winter." (No. It is winter.) And we didn't take our caps off. From the next day on the Appel was held in the inner corridor of the building.

Or: It must have happened that occasionally a prisoner was hit by his work leader. (Perhaps this is why I was so scared when mine found me doing mathematics.) The factory lay under a single high ceiling; the inner separating walls were low. (The structure of the building where we lived was the same.) The kapo didn't work and didn't come to the factory with us. This is why we were so surprised when, suddenly, we hear his voice filling the entire hall: "It has come to my knowledge that work leaders dared strike my prisoners. I warn you that if this is ever repeated, no prisoner will step in here again. Is it understood?" And it was understood.

Or: In March it was already warm spring weather. The kapo and several of us were in the large yard separating the factory from the building where we lived. The people of the village, mainly women, ventured as far as the iron fence and were staring at us with curiosity. The kapo was walking back and forth with springy steps, his well-built, fine figure remarkably attractive. All of a sudden he says: "You would like it, won't you, if there were among you such fine fellows as these? Have a little patience! We'll soon be coming."

Or: On March 31st, in the evening, we heard cannon shots. We were guessing, with excitement: What's happening? Is the front line getting near? How far can it be? And then the kapo spoke up: "What you are hearing is the noise of the front, at about 30 kilometers away."

I don't know for sure, but it is likely that the kapo played a large part in the covering up of the large scale sabotage action probably organized by the Russian prisoners. One evening we finished a whole series of airplane wings, there must have been about 30. The next morning we found the whole electric wiring -- two weeks' worth of work-- cut to pieces. The Gestapo people, the SS bigwigs, came to the camp. There was much ado and at the end, nothing happened, the culprits were not discovered and no one was harmed.

It was rumored about this excellent kapo that he was an anti semite. I don't believe it. The characterization probably originated with Gabi Hirsch, who was Stubendienst. This was the same Gabi Hirsch who reprimanded me for having exchanged cigarettes for bread in Magdeburg. He, Joska Farkas, and his brother, Jenö, and about four more people constituted a collective, that is, a support group whose main function was to share the extra food they managed to get. The only one I knew better was Gabi so I thought it was all right if I gave him my weekly 20 cigarettes for the collective. With these cigarettes I could have gotten several kilos of bread a week, or more margarine or cold cuts, from the SS or from the German workers. Gabi, who often had a second helping at dinner, once, only once, told me that I could eat his leftover soup, after he had already eaten the consistent part. (I was already in bed.) I remember how happily I fell asleep afterwards. Around midnight Gabi woke me up and put me to wash his canteen. Well, after liberation I found out from Joska Farkas that the collective had split after a while because the opinion of the majority was that the cigarettes had to be swapped for food after all. I also found out that they never saw any of my cigarettes. I only guess that Gabi did not smoke all the 500 cigarettes that he got from me during those six months; he must have gotten food with some of it. The soup he gave me was worth one cigarette butt.

Later, a three member collective got formed around me as well. The others were two simple but extremely decent fellows, who were younger than me. (Unfortunately I forget their names.) We were able to help each other only very little.



During these six months I was tormented, all day long, by hunger but especially, even in my dreams, I was tortured by the images of my parents' agony. I believed Baba to be alive but the thought of her sufferings was almost unbearable. Above all, I was preoccupied by Joki's fate. A miracle occurred: the SS dentist agreed to take letters between Buchenwald and Niederorschel. I wrote every month but never got any answer. The comrades were comforting me saying that Joki was alive and well but did not have the possibility to write. Of course,

I didn't believe it. So I went on writing my letters to the brother I thought long dead.

Thinking back on the Niederorschel camp I keep asking the question, over and over again: How was such a concentration camp possible? I think the answer can be inferred from two pieces of information. First, from November 17th Hitler stopped the gas chambers and crematoria; the Auschwitz-Birkenau plant didn't have to be fed by half-dead prisoners anymore. Second, the war industry had more and more difficulty because of the lack of manpower, while the expectations were continually rising. It was more important to squeeze work out of the prisoners, than their life. But it is beyond doubt that in Niederorschel kapo Otto's personal merit is inestimable.