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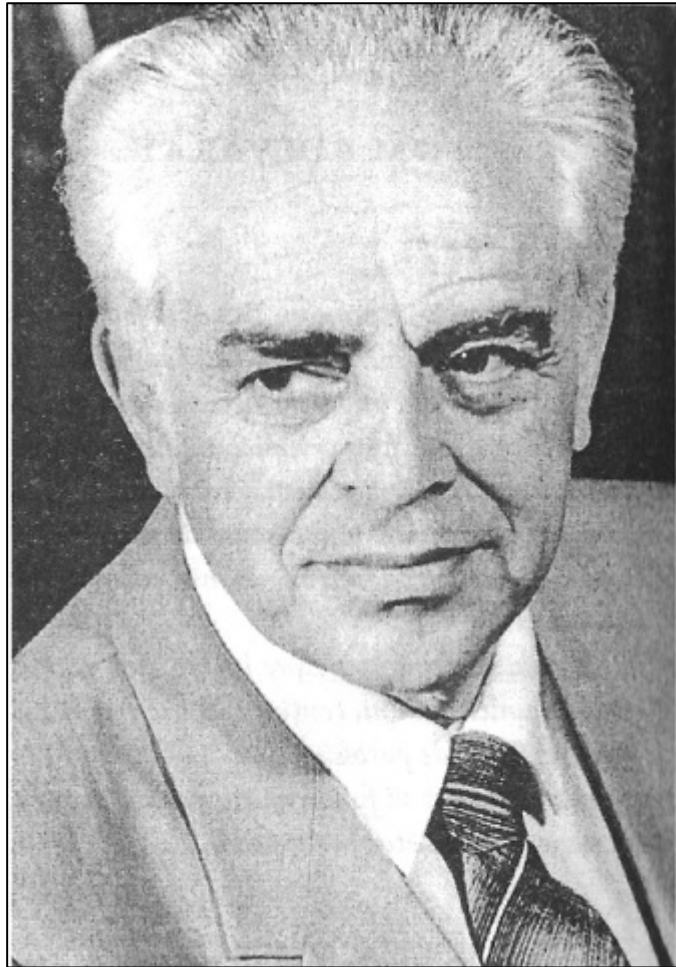
This is All I Remember

PART VII

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11. AFTER LIBERATION

Victor Frankl writes in his book that at the moment of liberation most prisoners were so indifferent that they did not feel any joy. *I* did. I was very happy. I could embrace again my resurrected dearly loved brother. Joki had gotten all my letters and knew everything about me, including the fact that I was close by for the last four days. It was only that he had no way of writing back.

In the camp I was not afraid of death and I did not cling to life. But now that we had found each other in the hour of freedom, now I wanted to live. (And I got very scared indeed when, one afternoon, during a lonely stroll on the hillside, I was shot at from a low-flying German plane.)

The Lagerälteste gave a short speech, broadcasted by the loudspeakers. "We are free. Everybody should stay in place and order should be kept. We will assure the nourishment of the population of the camp until the return home will be organized. We advise everybody to refrain from suddenly eating too much and from eating food that is too fat." And indeed we were fed excellently. The food cooked in the kitchens was plentiful and relatively tasty. It was difficult though to organize its distribution. Before liberation the convicts scrambled for the job of distributing food because then they could get the best part, and sometimes even seconds. Joki and I enlisted among the few who were now willing to perform this difficult task. And this did us a lot of good. Because of the physical exercise and the good nutrition we gained strength quickly. First we lived in the barracks of the camp but soon we moved into the abandoned lodgings of the SS, a five storeyed building situated outside the camp. We were about 2000 Hungarians. Dolcsi Herskovics and Lajko Roth were the 'doctors' (they had once been medical students), and they found that practically everybody was sick. Those who were in better shape, among them Joki and me, enlisted as orderlies. I never did harder work, even in the camp, than when we carried iron beds up the stairs to set up the four to six bed 'wards'. Finally no one was sleeping on stacked beds anymore. I was contented, because I could help. And I liked it, that people received undifferentiated treatment. It is possible, after all, to have socialist fairness. But after two days I found out that for Hillel Kohn (who had been the secretary of the illegal [communist] party of Transylvania, and had been dreadfully tortured during interrogations and then sentenced to many years in prison), luxurious quarters had been set up, with Persian carpets, where he lived by himself and got special food. This outraged me. I mentioned it to one, Odi, a young man from Budapest who played the 'personnel man' part among the communist leaders. I don't remember what his answer was, but I remember full well that his tone aroused a very oppressive, bad feeling in me.

Most people, whether healthy or sick, immediately started out to 'organize', that is, to obtain stuff. It seemed that one could discern national traits in the

nature of what different people were after. The Russians looked mostly for alcohol. (It was rumored that they found a car full of ethyl alcohol and many died from drinking of it.) The specialty of the French was leather clothes, that of the Poles was food and so on. There was one person who struck me, among the scurrying people. He was in no hurry, he couldn't possibly have been, this young man of average height, on his toothpick-like legs, because in his arms (two bent toothpicks) he was carrying stacks of fine art albums. This was Ernő Gál, whom I met then.¹

My contentment didn't last long. Very many died because they ate food that was too fat. But even from among those who were on the 'menu' that came from the kitchen, prepared according to medical advice, more and more got typhoid fever. Among them, Joki. But thanks to good care and his robust constitution he was soon on his feet again. But towards the end of May his temperature went up. Dolcsi suspected TB. Somehow I managed to transport him to Jena where he was examined in a hospital and where he was diagnosed with miliary tuberculosis.

The medical exam lasted two days and I had to sleep somewhere. I went to the bushy-haired, well-meaning mayor, who helped me obtain food tickets, but he couldn't find me any lodgings. A former prisoner, whom I ran into on the street (we easily recognized one another by our strange clothes), seeing my helplessness offered to share his room with me; he had an extra bed. He told me he lived in the local asylum, where he and someone else had a private room. I accepted the invitation. In the morning I woke up from a deep sleep to find two men in white coats squeezing my upper arm with a rubber strap while another was about to give me an injection. "Ich bin nicht Verrückt" (I am not crazy), I shouted. Sure, sure, I was not crazy, they assured me, but I saw on their faces that they considered what I was saying as the typical reaction of crazy people. Luckily, my young host stepped in in time, otherwise who knows ...

I came back with Joki to Buchenwald filled with anxiety and I immediately showed Dolcsi the diagnosis. "Bad luck", he said, and I sighed, relieved. If this is just 'bad luck' it cannot be too serious. Next day I searched the surrounding SS leaders' villas until I found a "Neue deutsche Klinik" from where I learned the death sentence. The course of Joki's illness followed exactly what the book described. After six weeks, on July 15th, he died in the hospital of Blankenheim. I dug his grave, I buried him, sobbing all the while. When, in the seventies, the university sent me to the GDR, I visited the cemetery of Blankenheim as part of the cultural program. I recognized the road leading there, the cemetery itself, but there was no trace of the grave, not even in the records.

¹ Ernő Gál returned to Kolozsvár where he was, for many turbulent years, the chief editor of *Korunk*, a Hungarian cultural publication. He and David stayed friends and exchanged postcards on April 11th throughout their lives.



After Joki's death I had only one hope left: to find my sister, Baba, alive. This is why I wanted to go home. But I also wanted to go home because I saw in socialism the only social form which can assure equality and freedom and which, at one blow, puts an end to ethnic discrimination, and therefore solves the Jewish question as well. Again and again I imagined how wonderful a socialist society must be if the communists were able to perform the miracles I witnessed even under the conditions of the concentration camp. I was disturbed by what I had seen regarding Hillel Kohn, I was appalled by Odi's tone and I was not enthusiastic about Lajko Roth's rapturous words and communist songs. But I considered socialism the only acceptable form of life. Joki, however, did not. He would have liked to go to Israel, and, had he survived, perhaps we would have emigrated there.

And the political battles raged on. The American authorities and the officials of the UNRA did all they could to prevent the return home of the young people. First, the only way one could set out for home was to pretend to be Russian. Later we organized a big demonstration and that proved effective. There were fewer and fewer Hungarian Jews and they were leaving, some for home, some to the West. We organized a Hungarian children's hospital. I was entrusted with its leadership. UNRA officials tried repeatedly to take the 14-16 year old children to the West. I remember an UNRA lady captain who asked me sternly to gather the children, whom we had sent out of the hospital on purpose before her arrival. "They have to be given a bath!" she said, energetically. I answered that I had no way of gathering them and besides, we had learned from the SS what those baths meant. But if she promised me that the children could go where they wanted, they would all be there in ten minutes. At which the red-haired, heavily rouged UNRA lady captain cried out: Didn't I know that the Russians were 'eating children'? Their propaganda was just as stupid and false as ours. We tried to dissuade people from going West by telling them of Swiss concentration camps and we frightened them by telling them they would be thrown on the frontline, to fight against the Japanese.

It's a great pity that I was persuasive. One fine day a bus stopped there. Eighteen Hungarian women were heading West, among them Noemi Albert and Juci Schlinger, both of whom I knew well from the Jewish High School, back in Kolozsvár. I helped them in everything, and especially in dissuading them from the 'folly' of going West, when at home socialist paradise was awaiting them. And I was successful. I never felt so sorry, in retrospect, for a success.

Eventually, there were only four Hungarians left in Buchenwald: Dr. Béla Neufeld, who was not transportable because he had suffered a heart attack, Lajko, who had stayed behind to treat him, Joki, and I. The Americans weren't of much help. True, once a jeep stopped before the SS hospital where we were staying, and brought us cans of sardines and ground meat by the hundreds but when I asked the American commander to allow me to buy fruit for Joki, who craved it very much, he turned down my request. I was obliged to steal.

But the American authorities had an excellent idea. Immediately after the liberation of the camp, American soldiers escorted the adult civilian population of Weimar up to Buchenwald. At the time we had not yet managed to bury the numberless corpses. The scene people were faced with was apocalyptic: beings reduced to skin and bones were hovering over the piles of skeleton-like corpses. There was hardly any difference between most of those still alive and the dead. The people of Weimar looked around, numb with shock and several hundred collapsed.

When later we occasionally went down to Weimar (I visited Goethe's half destroyed house, and Schiller's, which was still standing) the civilians, when hearing where we were from, reacted with a standard cry: "Aus Buchenwald?! Aber glauben Sie, davon haben wir nichts gewusst!" (From Buchenwald?! Rest assured, we knew nothing of all that!") I believed it then and I believe it today that they could not have known the horrific details of what went on in the concentration camps.

We were very happy when we heard that Buchenwald will be in the Russian zone. The Russians are coming, we thought enthusiastically. And they appeared. The Russian major ordered us to leave the building within the hour. Our argument, that obeying the order may cost the life of the communist Béla Neufeld, was without effect. There was no appeal. We somehow got hold of an ambulance, which took us to the hospital in Blankenheim.

After Joki's death I stayed on in Blankenheim for another month until the opportunity arose to take Béla Neufeld to a hospital in Prague in a Yugoslav car. After a few days in Prague I traveled to Budapest in a train transporting former prisoners. I went to the rabbinical seminary hoping that perhaps I will find there some of my papers. I didn't find anything. The Rector asked me: "Fränkel, did you want to become a doctor and Lusztig an engineer, or was it the other way around?"

I arrived in Kolozsvár on August 31st. My cousin, Özsi, back from labor camp, was already waiting for me. "Don't worry, all's well" he said. "I own two shirts and four underpants. Half of this is yours." "Thanks", I answered, touched, and, from the knapsack my friend Misi Almási was holding, and in which I had stuffed everything that Joki and I had gathered as orderlies, I took out thirty shirts, forty underpants, and forty pairs of socks and I said, here, half of this is yours.

I soon went to Temesvar because there was no engineering school in Kolozsvár. The admission exam involved seven written tests. There were ten of us, former concentration camp inmates, but none of us took advantage of the law that allowed us to register without going through the exam. Out of 540 candidates, 200 were admitted. All ten of us were among them. I was placed the 301st and for this I felt particularly grateful to my mathematics teacher from Niederorschel. The classes started. They were interesting and I studied with joy and success.

But life seemed dreadfully empty. From my many relatives who had lived in Hungary before the war, only two were still alive: Özsi, who was studying medicine, and Dr. Miksa Fränkel (Mackó², an attorney). Both were back from labor camp.



I was waiting for my sister, Baba, and Mackó for his adored wife, whose nickname was also Baba.

In my imagination I saw Baba suffering all kinds of horrendous torments, one more horrific than the other. (I found out only in 1985 that, aged 14, she had been in Birkenau throughout. She managed to avoid many block selections but eventually she ended in the gaz chamber. I don't even dare to think about how

² Mackó means Teddy bear and Baba means doll in Hungarian.

terrible the constant fear of selections must have been, and her last journey. Mother only suspected, but Baba knew exactly what awaited her.)

My life became unbearable not only because of the extent of my family's destruction but also because of the way it happened. I was drawn to the void left behind by their absence with a force I could not resist. I cut my veins. With a razor blade. I tried in three places. Without success. (Pretty pathetic, this, from someone who planned to be a doctor.) Mackó did the same thing when, half a year later, he found out from an eye witness that he was waiting for his wife in vain. He succeeded.