

MY LIFE

Part II

By Otto Feller

It was 1939. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, all were victims of Hitler's march across Europe. War had broken out between the German troops and Poland, and the fighting was intensifying. Romania, characteristically a nation of followers versus leaders, again aligned itself to stay in the good graces of her conquerors. Romania saw her neighbors falling one by one and chose to sacrifice her integrity to gain favoritism with the fanatical Third Reich. Racism, which had always existed subtly, now exploded into a full fledged political issue. Jews were forbidden to attend the university and could not apply for licenses. Jews could only hold low paying, menial jobs. The atmosphere became more and more oppressive. People who used to be friends were afraid to be seen with a Jew. Now, when passing an acquaintance on the street, eyes were averted to avoid recognition.

Some people formed organized groups, calling themselves Legionnaires or Iron Guard. They became bolder as they humiliated their victims, marching and singing that ended "...because the thieves and Kikes extort us all the time." They vandalized the homes of former neighbors, placing derogatory signs in the shop windows.

During this time, the Nazis and Croats in Yugoslavia killed my maternal grandmother who was diabetic and had lost both her legs; my mother's three sisters and their families; and many cousins. My father's family in Bulgaria survived, but one of his sisters and her family were killed in Poland.

One day, two Legionnaires came to the restaurant and forced my father at gunpoint to sign a document saying that he willingly donated the restaurant to the Legionnaires' organization. The fact that the store was under my father's friend's name did not help, and my father lost his entire investment.

We were forced to give up our apartment, and we had to move to my uncle's apartment. I was taken by the military to sweep the streets. The worst part of the job came when the big markets closed, because the farmers used horse-drawn carts. People stood on the sidewalks making fun of us Jews. That was very humiliating; little did we know at the time that the future would be far worse. When the freezing cold winter came and there was snow, we were forced to break and clean the ice from between railroad tracks. It was very hard to work in the freezing temperatures.

In 1941, I was called to the military headquarters and sent to the train station for transport to a place called Pancota. They put us in wagons used to transport animals, and we had to stand tight to each other for eight hours. After arriving at our destination, the commandant shouted "You are here to work, and your assignment will be to dig an irrigation canal. Those of you who cooperate will not get to know my anger, but those who do not cooperate will be severely punished or sent away to Transnistria (a concentration camp that meant death)."

There followed a month of physical and mental abuse, cruelty and deprivation. From the train station, we were taken to a ruined former castle and were placed in an animal barn with only straw on the ground for our so-called beds. It was a very tight sleeping space. At 6 am, it started. "Up, up, up you lazy Jews," the guards would shout. That was the introduction to what we would be forced to get used to.

The shouting, moaning and snoring sounds were everywhere. It seemed that there was never quiet in the middle of the night. With about 400 people, there was constant noise. Very often, someone who could not take it any more would scream, "Shut up." This only added more noise and confusion. There were no toilets – only a big empty area of a barn that everyone had to use. Because I am shy, that was a big problem for me. After a few weeks, the ground was filled with the human waste of hundreds of people, and we could hardly walk there anymore. One day, an Orthodox Jew with a long beard slipped on the human waste, fell forward, and his whole face became full of it. It was funny, but very sad.

Our main boss was a captain trained by the Nazis, and he treated us worse than animals. We had only one fountain where we could get very cold water for

washing ourselves. We had to wash quickly, because in 30 minutes we had to stay in line for some black hot water called coffee and a piece of so-called bread. After that breakfast, we rapidly marched five miles to where we had to start digging a big canal that would both improve irrigation and serve as a stop against attacks by enemy tanks. We were assigned each day to dig in a certain area, barefoot in mud full of blood suckers and bamboo plants. The majority of the men couldn't finish the work in nine hours, so we were forced to stay under supervision until late in the evening. If by any chance somebody couldn't finish his job, he was punished by not getting food for the day. If somebody tried to escape, he was beaten with a double belt on his naked behind, sometimes 25 times. We had to watch all of this to learn from it. If the person yelled with pain, he got extra hits. The supervisors were very strict. Soldiers always carried guns and watched us all the time, even at night. We had to be careful not to complain or criticize the government.



This picture was taken in secret, showing us digging barefoot in mud.

Several weeks passed, and each day was a monotonous repetition of the hunger and fatigue of the day before. We were always tired, and there was never enough to eat. The watery soups, black tasteless bread and weak coffee they fed us were simply not enough, especially with the heavy physical demands on our bodies. Lice also were a problem. Gasoline was poured all over my body to get rid of the pesky insects, adding burns and sores to my already miserable condition.

Many people, especially those with families, were crying and complaining that they would be never released and would never see their families again. Some people became desperate to know what was happening at home or on the front lines. Unfortunately, their pessimism affected us, too. I tried to stay strong by thinking about happy times with my friends and family. Sometimes, I craved a cigarette, which could be rarely found. To get half a cigarette I often helped an older person finish a digging job he wasn't able to do on time.

After a few months of digging, we had covered a few miles and therefore moved to other locations. One day, I developed a bad infection in my leg from the mud and blood suckers, and my leg swelled to double its size. At the same time, I had a stomach infection, and my eyes and face became yellow. I was told that I had infectious hepatitis, which meant I was contagious and had to be separated from the other prisoners.

I was sent to an old abandoned cemetery in an outlying village in the middle of nowhere. The cemetery had a little building with no doors or windows, and the floor was just dirt crawling with flies and bugs. Being the middle of summer, it was hot, and flies swarmed all over my body. I got some straw for my bed, and I used the grass and weeds outdoors for my bathroom.

I was already used to that. Our Jewish doctor made an incision in my infected leg and a lot of blood and pus sprayed all over. He told me that he didn't have time to put on a bandage, so I should do it myself. At this point, with absolutely no hope of being free ever again, my life had no meaning and I really didn't care if I lived or died. I was far from my group, and only a friend of mine was allowed to bring some food (with a soldier escort). I didn't eat for one week, and even today, I can't understand how I survived.

After two weeks, the doctor arranged for me to return to my home town (Timisoara), where my parents and relatives would care for me. I was sent to a hospital, where I stayed for one month (it took a big loan to pay the hospital bill). The day I left the hospital, I had to appear before the military commandant who immediately sent me back to the labor camp. I was so weak that I could hardly walk.

Back at the camp, everyone asked me questions. How is the situation at home? What do you know about the political situation? Is there hope for us Jews? Will we be able to survive? I had no good answers for them. I had to start work again, and it got worse because the winter nights were so cold. We were freezing, since we only had a small wood burning stove. We had to dig outside, even though the ground was completely frozen and I developed frostbite on my feet and nose.

After many months, we were finally exchanged with a new group of Jews, and we were sent to Mocreia, a mountain area about 200 miles from home. There, we used a long steel chisel and big heavy hammers to drill deep holes in the mountain, insert dynamite in the holes, and ignite the dynamite. We would yell "FIRE," so everyone would take cover because the explosions threw huge rocks around.

I spent three months in Mocreia before being sent to Deva, a city in Transylvania, where we built railroad tracks in the mountains. We worked for five months through the fall and the harsh winter. Every day, they took us in open wagons from our residence to the working area about eight miles away. That was unpleasant, especially in the freezing winter when there weren't any places in the open wagons to protect ourselves from the snow and blowing wind. Again, the supervisors would yell, scream and call us "dirty Jews."

Next, I was transferred to a construction area where we loaded and unloaded sand and rocks from trucks. We had to shovel quickly and without rest. After about two months, I was transferred to carry cement for the construction of a big underground bomb shelter for the Army High Command. We were being bombed almost every night by American airplanes. We were afraid of the bombs, but happy that the Americans were getting closer to us. The moment the city sirens sounded, I had to walk two to three miles through dark, empty streets to an

assigned area. Sometimes, we found dead people, and we had to carry them to a morgue. Several times during the air raids, we were standing in deep underground chambers that we had dug ourselves. Pressure from the bombs made the walls collapse. Many of our comrades were asphyxiated, and some died next to me. The building where my parents lived was hit by firebombs, which caused a fire in one of their rooms.

From the time I first started working at the labor camps, we were forced to wear a yellow arm band with a Star of David to be recognized as Jews. We lived in the western part of the country, but we knew that the Romanians had killed Jews by the thousands in the eastern area. Jews were packed into freight transports called death trains. Thousands of people were crowded into cattle cars – no windows and in unbearable heat – which were forcibly closed. The Antonescu regime did not consider Jews to be human beings, and they hoped to clean all the land of Jews. We didn't know it at the time, but we later found out that in just one month, we were scheduled for the death camps.

Finally, on August 23, 1944, we were liberated by the Russian army. We were sent home and told we were free. But in just two weeks, the German army approached our city, and that frightened the Jewish community. Everybody decided to move east, where the Russian army was established. Since there were no cars or trains, our whole family gathered some belongings and started to walk 52 miles. On the road, we were bombed by German planes. We had to dive for the ground; fortunately, nothing happened to us. Two days later, we arrived in Lugoj, where we rented a room. For the first time in our lives, we were happy to see Russian soldiers. My sister's boyfriend came with us, and he carried my sister's belongings, which were pretty heavy. When we arrived and she opened her luggage, he saw that she had packed her silver shoes and cocktail dresses. He became very upset, and I was laughing, knowing how snobbish she was.

In just three or four days, the German army was beaten into retreat, and we started to walk back to our city. Even today, August 23, 1944, remains a special day of freedom for me because the previous four years were very hard.

Next part in the next issue of the website.

Part I http://www.bjt2006.org/OF_My_Life_1_0314.pdf