

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

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Kreuzsee Bei Reppen

Following a decision in late 1941 to stop work on the Reichsautobahn in the Wartheland, responsibility for the workforce was taken away from civilian companies and passed on to central government authorities. A question arose at the General Inspector for the German Road System and the Reich's Security Main Office in Berlin: what to do with the men in the thirty-seven camps along the abandoned route? Worsening work conditions in some camps took a heavy toll on the labourers. Many suffered from injuries, exhaustion and malnutrition. Some succumbed to these conditions and were buried where they worked. Still, having forced labourers was hard for the Germans to let go of, especially in a time of acute labour shortages. In December, a medical examination by a physician was called to determine the group's fate.

At the end of a selection process, those not deemed fit to work were sent by trains back to the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, where many were immediately hospitalized. Some died shortly after their arrival and the rest, unable to work, were sent to their death in Kulmhof months later with their families. The weakest ones were deported to death camps or by some accounts killed in gas vans. Those judged to be capable of working were to be sent to a few of the camps that originally served the autobahn construction, which were now set to function as holding-pens until other work assignments could be found.¹ Chaim, who was in relatively good physical shape, was among the sixty men from the original three hundred who arrived at Pinnow Bei Reppen in April 1940 who were chosen for transfer to another camp.

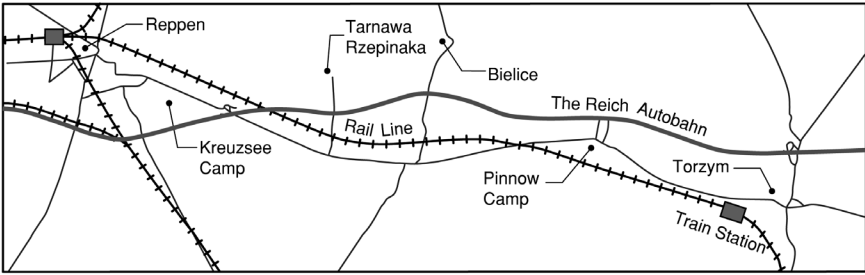
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Snow-laced, leafless tree branches lined the road when a small convoy of trucks exited the Pinnow camp's gates one morning. A road sign pointed in the direction of the town of Reppen (Rzepin), and in the distance they could see the frozen surface of Lake Długie, surrounded by bare trees at this time of the year. The area was a known tourist draw as visitors and locals crowded the lake's sandy beaches in summertime. Two stern-looking armed SS men accompanied them and sat in front of the hauler. As with their departure from Litzmannstadt, the group knew little about their new destination or what kind of work they would be forced to do now that the autobahn construction was halted. They could not tell whether not being sent back home was a blessing or a curse. Mulling the twists and turns that his life had taken in the past year, Chaim wondered about the chapter about to unfold at his next destination.

After a short drive, the trucks veered off the main road onto a path, passed through a gate and, near a sign that read Kreuzsee Bei Reppen, stopped. The SS men who accompanied them and now others shouted commands to disembark and to arrange themselves in rows in the snow-covered yard. The camp's layout was like the one they had just left. At the rear there were six barracks for accommodation and sanitary stations for the workers, and at the front a few barracks to house the staff and the guards. An SS officer approached. Wearing a coat, a hat, gloves and shiny black boots, he looked at the men and spoke in a menacing tone.

"You will be staying here until a new workplace can be found for you. Until then, you will be employed in a variety of tasks for the Reich. Disobedience, attempted escapes and disrespect will be severely punished, some by death. You must respect the camp's schedule, keep the barracks and yourself clean and line up for your meals."

When the officer had finished, the camp's Kapo approached the group. A labourer himself, he was selected to carry out the officer's orders. A tall Jewish man who Chaim vaguely recognized from Bałuty approached and introduced himself. He spoke in Yiddish and stated that his orders must be respected much like the Germans'. No one should approach any of the officers or guards, as everything must pass through him. He then proceeded to disperse the men to the barracks to which they were assigned and to the beds left empty by those who had left.



9.1 Locations of the Pinnow Bei Reppen and Kreuzsee Bei Reppen labour camps.

Looking around, Chaim could tell that something was horribly wrong with Kreuzsee Bei Reppen. The men already in the barracks were walking skeletons, with a dazed look. They were far different from those who had left Litzmannstadt with him in April and split up with at the Torzym train station. Some he knew but no longer recognized. Their numbers also dwindled. And if these are the healthy ones, he wondered, what happened to the others before they were sent back home or had died? When talking to a few, he soon learned about the kind of place he now found himself in.

Pinnow, the camp Chaim left, was managed and guarded by representatives of a civilian company who treated the men reasonably. They were made to work under extreme conditions, but the little food they were fed provided enough calories for them to survive. By contrast, the men in Kreuzsee Bei Reppen were subject to a different attitude and rules that were set by the local Lagerältester; he displayed a different mindset to his subordinates, which effectively meant annihilation through work. With little food, they were made to work to death through starvation, exhaustion and beatings. Now that the Reichsautobahn work was suspended, the men were at the mercy of the SS, who cared even less about them.

The Protection Squadron (SS Schutzstaffel), one of whose units now ran Kreuzsee, was established and began operation as a paramilitary organization parallel to the Nazi Party's establishment. In 1925, Heinrich Himmler joined the group that over the years became known for its extreme brutality. Its main early task was to enforce the racial

Nuremberg Laws and to oversee the Reich's internal security apparatuses. Opponents of the regime were murdered or sent to labour camps. SS power steadily grew to include other divisions such as the mass-killing operations.² The SS, being an organization closest to Hitler's merciless genocidal worldview, gained much more power in zones bereft of conventional state authority. Ghoulishly nicknamed "the state destroyers," the SS was tasked with the punitive administration of concentration and labour camps from the beginning of the Nazi regime, continuing in death camps and various slave labour camps until the end of World War II. These slave labour camps were considered stateless zones, or zones of exception, meaning that the SS had free reign there, unlike in the average German city. Deportations were carried out in coordination with the RSHA (Reich Security Main Office).³

In 1939 Himmler established the *Verwaltungs und Wirtschaftshauptamt* (Administration and Business Main Office) and appointed Oswald Pohl as its head. Pohl and his deputies resorted to advanced management practices, prioritizing efficiency methods and profitability.⁴ Under Pohl the SS became a highly enterprising body with links to many of Germany's leading industries. As a modern incarnation of a slave market, invitations were extended to companies vital to the Reich's war machine to tap into a large, cheap labour pool from which they could profit in return for fees paid to the SS for its services.

The SS was responsible for housing the labour force in the Kreuzsee camp until its selection for a new assignment was made, transporting them to and at times guarding them in the new location. While being kept in the holding-pen there was no concern for the prisoners' well-being. According to Nazi racial policies those enslaved, primarily Jews and Slavs, were members of inferior races eventually to be annihilated once their usefulness ended. Economically, the SS did not care about deaths since no payments were made for getting the men in the first place, nor was compensation to their families to be given. And if they perished, millions of other able men and women could be forced to take their place. The SS goal was to keep the people at Kreuzsee alive at a minimum cost until a new work assignment could be found.

Winter conditions brought severe shortages of food. Germany relied on its own summer harvest and those plundered or purchased from lands under its sphere of influence and occupation. Feeding its citizens



9.2 Forced labourers, likely from the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, on their way to or from work near the Kreuzsee Bei Reppen labour camp.

and its enormous army stretched this capacity to the limit. In the winter of 1942, the promised food dividend from the invasion of the Soviet Union and the capture of its fertile lands did not materialize, especially with the “scorched earth” strategy that the Red Army employed, burning crops as they retreated rather than leaving them to their enemy. Feeding millions of prisoners of war, people in forced labour camps like Kreuzsee Bei Reppen and in Ghettos like Litzmannstadt became impossible. Working them to death was the resulting solution, which became policy.⁵

The deteriorating morale of the SS troops was also visible in Kreuzsee. In the war’s early years, following constant victories, the

Germans were jubilant and euphoric. They had conquered much of Europe with relatively few losses. The army's feeling of invincibility came to a halt at the gates of Moscow.⁶ As convoys of wounded soldiers made their way back home, and as losses mounted, news about them spread. Punishment of SS troops for any poor performance was deployment to the Eastern Front, where conditions were miserable and survival uncertain.

* * *

Living to see another day summed up Chaim's life in the winter of 1942. It was a daily struggle that centred on avoiding starvation and the sadistic behaviour of the SS guards. The day began at dawn with a roll call on the snow-covered assembly yard, after which the men returned to their barracks. Breakfast was unsweetened boiled water mixed with substitute grain-based coffee. When this was not available, some sort of herbal tea was served. It was then back to the yard and a walk to their place of work. With the autobahn construction ended and the ground frozen, work was initiated by the camp's SS head. It was senseless "keep busy" work that included moving boulders from one place to the next and odd maintenance tasks around the camp, all accompanied by beatings.

Lunch was vegetable soup made with potato peels or cabbage leaves and a small amount of rye flour. As the men were lined up to be served, a guard stood by and ordered them to remove their hats and shirts for lice-checking. With his stick, he inspected people's heads and underarms. A person suspected of having lice was thrown out of the food line and beaten severely. Chaim recalled the beating he endured when robbed at the Chichev Station upon attempting to cross to Białystok and the interrogation when caught returning to Litzmannstadt. When lice inspections became routine, many stopped coming to lunch altogether, fearing a beating. Then, it was back to work until dark. Supper consisted of three hundred grams of black bread, approximately the size of a man's fist, served at times with a spoonful of margarine. The number of calories provided by these meals averaged thirteen hundred, roughly half the amount needed for a working man to survive.⁷

After working to exhaustion on frigid days with little or no food, Chaim started to exhibit symptoms of malnutrition. Under a

combination of a deteriorating mind and body, he felt constant fatigue and an inability to function or think rationally. He kept falling into states of withdrawal and depression. His body scavenged itself for any scrap of fat it could muster, including muscle mass and organ tissues. He began to resemble the walking skeletal men he had seen when arriving at Kreuzsee. They walked aimlessly, their head covered with a blanket that somehow evoked the name *Muselmann* (Muslim). Living on the edge of life, they were the first to die and were buried near the campground. The number of empty beds in Chaim's barrack grew steadily.

* * *

The sole way to survive Kreuzsee Bei Reppen was to leave the place. Departing alive was only possible if one was selected and sent to work elsewhere. This was also far from certain, since representatives of the Reich's industries did not come often to the camp, as many companies could tap into other pools of forced labour, such as those locked up in other camps, Ghettos and prisoner-of-war camps. Chaim tried to gather up every shred of positivity he had left, convincing himself that, despite the place's conditions, survival would still be possible.

During one of the morning roll calls in April 1942, the camp's SS officer announced that on the following day a visit by an industry representative would take place. The men were instructed to gather in the yard at a certain hour for a selection, starting with a visual assessment and a medical examination to follow. Hearing the announcement Chaim's heart raced, believing that this was his chance, perhaps the last one to live. There was no way to prepare for it but wait all night and hope.

In the early afternoon, some two hundred men gathered in the assembly yard, where they were told to strip naked and walk in a circle. On the edge of the perimeter stood a well-dressed man who closely inspected the parading men. He seemed to know what he was looking for, avoiding those showing ribs on their chests, poor leg and arm muscle tone and flat bottoms. He knew that they were already in very poor physical shape, and the little strength that remained in them would not be enough for the hard work expected. When seeing someone he wanted, the visitor noted this for the SS guard who then pulled the

man out of the circle. Those chosen proceeded to a medical exam by a physician who looked for signs of deformity or injuries and at the state of their teeth. The process lasted for a while as shivering naked men kept walking until eighty were selected.

Chaim was not chosen. He was devastated. Not being selected meant he was effectively a skeleton and, even if he were to live long enough for another visit, his chances of being taken were slight. He knew that his destiny now was to end life through starvation or be sent to die somewhere like those he had seen taken away. Taking his own life crossed his mind. It was a very bad afternoon and a terrible night that followed. When the barracks lights were turned off, he could hear the joy of those chosen speculating about the unknown place they were going to. Over a sleepless night his spirit kept swinging between desperation and hope.

* * *

Chaim left his barrack before dawn, pretending that he was going to the bathroom. Looking around to ensure that he was not noticed, he entered the barrack on the edge of the semi-circle. In the dimmed moonlight that broke in through the windows he walked silently between a row of beds into the corner. The space was distinguished by a wider single bed and a bedside cabinet. It was the Kapo's, whom he had recognized upon arrival at Kreuzsee's sleeping quarters.

Kapos (*Funktionshäftling* in German), Chaim knew, wielded lots of power, a privilege given to them for liberating the SS from performing the day-to-day tasks of running the camp and dealing with the labourers. Some oversaw the work and prevented escapes while the group was outside the camp. Others were barracks elders responsible for the cleanliness of the place, keeping the men on schedule and looking after food distribution. The most powerful were the camp administrators who could appoint people to coveted jobs like kitchen duties and clerical work. In return for their service and loyalty the Kapos got better-quality accommodations and food, cigarettes and alcohol. They were under constant scrutiny by the SS to perform well and often hated by the men they were assigned to oversee for informing on people and for being harsh disciplinarians who at times resorted to beatings.⁸

Chaim approached the Kapo's bed. The man was asleep. Not remembering his name, Chaim touched the man's back lightly and woke him up.

"Do you remember me?" Chaim whispered in Yiddish.

Once awakened, the Kapo was surprised and indicated that he did not recognize him.

"I am Hela Frydman's brother. I think the two of you were in the same circle of friends. I recall you visiting her at times."

"Yes, I remember you now. What do you want?" the Kapo asked abruptly.

"A transport is leaving the camp tomorrow" Chaim said. "I was not selected, and you know what staying here means. Can you help me leave?"

Chaim knew that he was asking a lot of a person he knew little of, in a place and time where people did not care much about one another, and where life had little value. The Kapo was also aware that his options were limited, and if he was caught tampering with a process and a list that was already decided on, his position would be terminated or, worse, he could be severely punished.

As the night turned to dawn, the Kapo looked at Chaim and said: "Be in the assembly yard with your belongings at 10:30."

Chaim walked back to his barrack unnoticed.

At 10:30 a.m. the men who were set to leave lined up in rows in the yard. Chaim, pretending that he was one of the chosen, stood among them, his heart racing. Two trucks waited near the gate. The Kapo held a list and read the departing men's names; they acknowledged their presence aloud under the watchful eyes of the SS guards. Chaim's name was read. At 11 a.m. the group boarded the trucks. The engines started and the trucks began their slow move through the gate, on a dirt path towards the main road to the Reppen train station.

