

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

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Plattling

Tired, hungry and suffering the effects of the deadly march from Monowitz and the days spent in Gleiwitz, Chaim walked with others to a train station near the camp. The merciless attitude of the guards made him realize how fragile his life was. There was nothing to do but obey orders and hope that he would be among the lucky ones to survive. He was relieved that the next leg of his ordeal would be by train. Of course, he did not expect a passenger car, but even a freight car like the one that took him from Eberswalde to Birkenau would be a relief. When they reached the station area, they saw fleeing ethnic German families crowding the platforms, carrying suitcases and household belongings. A short while later a locomotive arrived pulling open freight cars. It was assigned to them. Chaim knew at once the implications of traveling in open cars in freezing temperatures. There was no limit to Nazi cruelty, he thought.

Destroying, or at the very least, crippling the enemy's rail system by air attacks or guerrilla warfare was a strategic objective of the Allies and of the Red Army. As air raids kept being launched against German transit installations and rolling stock, closed freight cars were assumed to be carrying equipment and ammunition to the front and hence were destroyed. The remaining ones were badly needed for the war effort. By then, the Luftwaffe was preoccupied with wars on two fronts and unable to stop these attacks. Rail service was disrupted for days when bombed-out trains had to be removed and tracks repaired. Assigning very little importance to their human cargo, the SS took the only cars they could, open ones, designed to ferry coal and produce.

There were too few cars to contain the entire group. Shouts rang out, ordering the prisoners to board. Fearing that those left behind

would be killed and hoping to secure a sitting spot, they stampeded. More than a hundred people crammed into each car. In an extremely crowded setting, people folded their legs, some sat on top of others, and some many remained standing. Stepping on each other's fingers and toes, fights erupted in which the watching guards took pleasure. The latrine bucket that commonly was placed in such trains was nowhere to be seen. Reaching it would not have been possible anyway. Those seated were afraid to stand for fear of losing their spot. The last car, for the use of the SS, was a closed freight car with a windowed, higher cabin on its edge on which a guard stood with a machine gun. Another guard stood sheltered at the rear of the locomotive.

As the train began to move and gained speed, Chaim, sitting on his small backpack, pulled up his striped jacket and covered his head. It was of little help in the blowing wind and snow that had started to fall. When day turned to night and the temperature kept falling, the train stopped. Cries for help went unanswered. When someone attempted to stand or move, the guards did not hesitate to shoot. On the edge of freezing, Chaim struggled to stay awake and wrapped himself in his blanket. With a friend who sat close by, he arranged that they would take turns sleeping for short periods. When day broke, the train stopped. Some people tried to stretch their limbs. Others did not, as they had frozen to death. In the crowded car it was impossible to move the deceased aside or to get permission to move them off the train. They remained seated among them in awkward positions. Some of the living men sat on the bodies.

When the train was on the move once more, they entered a mountainous area. The names on the signs indicated that they were in prewar Czechoslovak territory. No food or water were given. Chaim reached into his pocket and got a small hunk of bread and grabbed some snow for water. The train stopped once more – on the edge of Prague, where passersby watched in disbelief the horrible-looking crowd of living and dead men. Some prisoners gestured with hand signals that they were hungry. From a distance a citizen threw some bread to the car. A fight erupted among those seated near where the bread fell, with people grabbing it from each other's hands and mouths to the delight of the watching guards.

After a long wait, at night the train was on the move. The guards kept shooting over people's heads to discourage escapes. Then another stop and more frozen corpses. Not permitted to get off, the prisoners defecated where they sat. Trains carrying materials and soldiers kept passing them in either direction. From their train they could also spot long convoys of citizens fleeing Czechoslovak territory on foot in a westbound direction. At one of the following stops, a secluded place, the guards ordered the removal of the half-naked dead, whose clothing or shoes had been removed for use by others at the rear, which also freed some space in each car.

The landscape and the names of places changed once more when the train kept moving. They were now on old Reich territory. On February 2, 1945, the prisoners reached their destination when the train stopped in Flossenbürg. For the SS, delivering their human cargo to this spot did not entail that all of them needed to arrive alive. Only half of the people who left Gleiwitz by train had survived. The dead were piled on top of each other in the rear of the cars or sat frozen among the living.¹ It was the closest that Chaim came to being one of them. Since leaving Monowitz and not having had a meal for days he had lost weight, and worried that he would not survive a selection if one were to take place.

* * *

While a few of the arriving prisoners remained behind to bury the dead in a mass grave, the rest marched on for about six kilometres to a camp. An early example of an SS economic enterprise, the camp was located near the municipality of Flossenbürg in the district of Neustadt an der Waldnaab, close to the Fichtel Mountains of Bavaria near the Czechoslovak border. Many of the town's twelve hundred inhabitants worked in the granite quarries that the place was known for. Many of the town's buildings were constructed of this stone.² When the Nazis rose to power, granite became a favourite material for their monumental buildings, and it rose in value.³ In 1938, at the invitation of local authorities, a forced-labour camp was established, owned and operated by the SS, to mine the resources on a mountain slope. Unlike most slave labour camps that were built in remote locations and isolated, Flossenbürg was located in the heart of Floss, a small town, and was surrounded by homes. An imposing three-storey granite building with

FLOSS		47332 ✓
FRIEDMANN, Henrik		
<i>State of arrival in Floss 6.2.45 No 47332 from Sachsenhausen Previous R.L. Hundwitzer No 144003</i>		
Pohn./Jude 47332 No 144003 Friedmann, Henrik 3.5.1918 Lodz Dachdecker led. keine mos.		
Zugang vom K.L. Auschwitz <i>Sachsenhausen</i> 6.8.43 K.L. Huschw. am 6.2.45.		

14.1 Chaim's registration card from the Flossenbürg concentration camp declaring himself to be a Dachdecker (roofer).

sloping red-tile roofs and an arched entrance marked the gateway to the camp. A sign with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei* (Work will set you free) was affixed to a wall to the left of the entrance. The camp had long wooden barracks arranged in parallel rows, with a roll-call square, a kitchen and an infirmary surrounded by electric fence and watchtowers. There were also long single-storey masonry buildings for the guards and SS officers who operated the place. Those condemned to death were held without food in an underground bunker, then executed by hanging and cremated in a building at the rear of the camp.⁴ As in the other locations, a network of some one hundred subcamps was soon built in the region to house other industries for the SS to profit from.⁵ Even in this area surrounded by village homes, the guards of Flossenbürg practised extreme brutality, and death by labour in the quarry was common.

When his group entered Flossenbürg, to Chaim's relief there was no selection. When they registered, he called himself Henrik and declared



14.2 Part of the grounds of the Flossenbürg concentration camp. The small building at the rear is the crematorium.

himself to be *Dachdecker* (roofer). Knowing the damage caused by the Allies' air raids to cities, his invented skill, he hoped, might be in high demand. Also, it might entail working alongside civilians, which would mean extra food.⁶ The seemingly organized reception did not match the place's conditions, which as in Gleiwitz were horribly chaotic. Thousands of prisoners had arrived from camps in the advancing Red Army's path in the preceding weeks and months, so the camp was crowded the camp well beyond its capacity.

They were of different faiths and nationalities, survivors of death marches and deadly train rides who were left on the edge of death. With so many people, finding a spot in a barrack, previously done by Kapos, was left to the prisoners. Some barracks had to be avoided altogether since the people in them had typhoid. Those who found a spot had to share a bunk bed with nine others. Even if the purpose of bringing them to Flossenbürg was work, there was nothing for them to do and hardly any food. They scavenged for food in the kitchen's

garbage, traded or ate the very little that occasionally was given in the evenings. Getting help at the crowded infirmary was impossible, with dozens dying daily.⁷

Short on SS guards – who had been sent to fight the advancing Red Army and Allied forces – the camp's commandant, Max Koegel, established a police force made up of the camp's hardened criminals of ethnic-German origin from outside the Reich, most of whom were fanatical Nazis and who took pleasure in killing Jews. They were given uniforms and, for no apparent reason, singled out people for beatings. To prevent a revolt, they conducted selective executions by killing groups' leaders, many of whom were Soviet prisoners of war.⁸

As with his Kreuzsee Bei Reppen experience, Chaim knew that if he stayed any longer in Flossenbürg without food, with random beatings and crowded sleeping arrangements in the depths of winter, he would soon be one of dead bodies that were laid in the yard daily. His chance to leave the place came when a Kapo entered his barracks and said that people were needed for roof repair. Having declared himself to be a roofer, he immediately stepped forward and was ordered to wait near the gate the next day. It was another lucky, fast-thinking and lifesaving situation. When the small group of prisoners gathered, their numbers were called, and they were marched to the train station at which they had arrived days earlier. They boarded an open train wagon and travelled the 195-kilometre distance with a long pause in the middle, arriving in the morning at the town of Plattling's train station.

* * *

Plattling, located in an isolated part of Bavaria near the Austrian and Czechoslovak borders, with a population of thirteen thousand, had a dedicated base of Nazi supporters.⁹ In 1944 and 1945, activities in the area demonstrated that Hitler and his deputies delusionally believed that, despite their heavy losses, the war could still be won. Using forced labourers, the Germans built monumental military installations, including airplane production facilities that were dug into mountains' bellies. In them, they developed and assembled advanced weapons of last resort like the V-1 rockets, which they believed could tilt the balance of the war in their favour. Another new weapon was the Heinkel-Messerschmitt (Me)262, the prototype of the jet plane. To support these

activities, the SS built in Plattling one of Flossenbürg's subcamps. The local airstrip became the site on which the airplane was tested, which also made the place a target of repeated Allied air raids.¹⁰

On a winter morning in late February 1945, the group marched from the train station through empty streets walled by buildings with colourful facades to the heart of the city near the Rathaus – the Town Hall. The place reminded Chaim of Eberswalde. Two- and three-storey buildings, some built in rows with residences on top of stores, made up the town centre. People stood near windows watching them walk by. The group was housed in a Kanbenschulhaus Boys' School, turned into a camp, near the church of Saint Magdalena. Following complaints from the townspeople, who did not want prisoners in their midst, they were transferred to the Frohnauer brick factory on the edge of town, that had also been converted into a camp.

The place was made up of several small brick buildings covered with white plaster linked to one another, with an entrance through a metal gate. On the edge of the compound there was a two-storey masonry building with a red-tiled sloped roof. Village homes circled the place, and the tall tower of the cemetery was visible near by. Clearly not made to house people, it was drafty and cold.¹¹ Under the supervision of work Kapos, the men were divided into several Kommandos. Some were tasked with an extension of an airstrip needed for the jet's takeoff. People cleared snow, levelled the soil and dug ditches. As the war progressed, the air raids intensified, parts were no longer manufactured, and the weapon system's development and testing were halted. The work gradually shifted to attending to the damage caused by the air raids and removing debris, recovering corpses, and supporting reconstruction. Despite the gruelling dawn-to-dusk work, Chaim had an opportunity to mingle with civilians and to supplement the little food that he was given.

Conditions in the camp were among the harshest he had experienced since the start of the war, on a level with Kreuzsee Bei Reppen. The cold, the hunger and the extreme brutality of the guards, now joined by members of the Hitler Youth, took a heavy toll. People were killed for minor infractions like taking too much time in the toilet. They were pushed into the latrines and left there to die.¹² It was common for Chaim to see a bunkbed mate die overnight. Here too, other

prisoners rapidly removed the dead man's clothing to leave him naked. Hearing about the activities in the not-so-distant front and speculating on the location of the advancing American troops, Chaim hoped that his liberation was near, motivating a day-by-day struggle to stay alive.

* * *

In April 1945, some three months after Chaim's arrival in Plattling, Germany was on the edge of total defeat, and its civil institutions were disintegrating. Once more the question of what to do with the camps and their prisoners arose. Despite the brutal annihilation by forced marches and train rides there were still hundreds of thousands of men and women prisoners under guard in camps spread throughout the Reich. If a few months earlier there were some rational aspects in Himmler's order to abandon camps in the advancing Red Army's path, which had sparked the first wave of death marches, that was now all gone. Knowing that the war was approaching its end, local camp commanders waited for orders about what to do with the men and women under their guard.

On April 14, Himmler issued an order that "not a single prisoner should fall alive into the enemy's hands." By doing so, he echoed Hitler's express wish that all the camps be destroyed, and their prisoners killed.¹³ Himmler and his deputy recognized the enormity of the challenge and its consequences. Like other Nazi leaders, Himmler also realized that Hitler's mind was in a delusional state and renewed his own initiative, which was different from the one he pursued earlier. He intensified his parallel negotiations with the Allies, in which he was hoping to use the prisoners as a valuable bargaining chip, but with little success. The general order given to camps' commanders was to march the prisoners away from the advancing enemies' armies into places where they could be imprisoned and to kill those who lagged behind.

On April 24, the Plattling subcamp was evacuated on foot. The nine hundred prisoners were divided into groups of up to two hundred and guarded by about fifteen soldiers each.¹⁴ They walked in the direction of the town of Traunstein, where a subcamp of Dachau was located.¹⁵ Decisions about the route and the stops along the way were left to the camp's head or the SS man responsible for the march. The attitude of the guards seemed to have changed somewhat. There were

still some fanatics with rifles among them who did not hesitate to shoot lingering walkers, but there were also those who displayed a somewhat softer attitude. Knowing that they might be caught by the advancing Americans and be held accountable for what they had done to the people under their guard, the edge of the SS soldiers' brutality softened a bit. It was said that some of the guards even had civilian clothes in their backpack, ready to rid themselves of their uniforms and run away on a moment's notice.¹⁶ The prisoners, too, could feel the vulnerability of their tormentors. The roles began to shift a bit. Their faith was still in the hands of the soldier in charge, but a thin ray of hope shone through.

In early spring, Chaim was on his second death march, this time on German soil. They walked on muddy roads where the snow had just melted. Villagers stepped out to watch, with little sympathy, the ghastly looking men passing through. Rumours circulated among the prisoners that they were being marched to a hidden place, a forest perhaps, where they would be executed. Avoiding negative thoughts, Chaim kept thinking about the places he had been to since the start of the war and his miraculous survival. He did not want to die so near the end of the war, hoping that his family or at the very least some of them might still be alive. Walking rapidly, with gunshots sounding from the rear, few pauses, and no food it became another endurance struggle, perhaps the harshest yet.

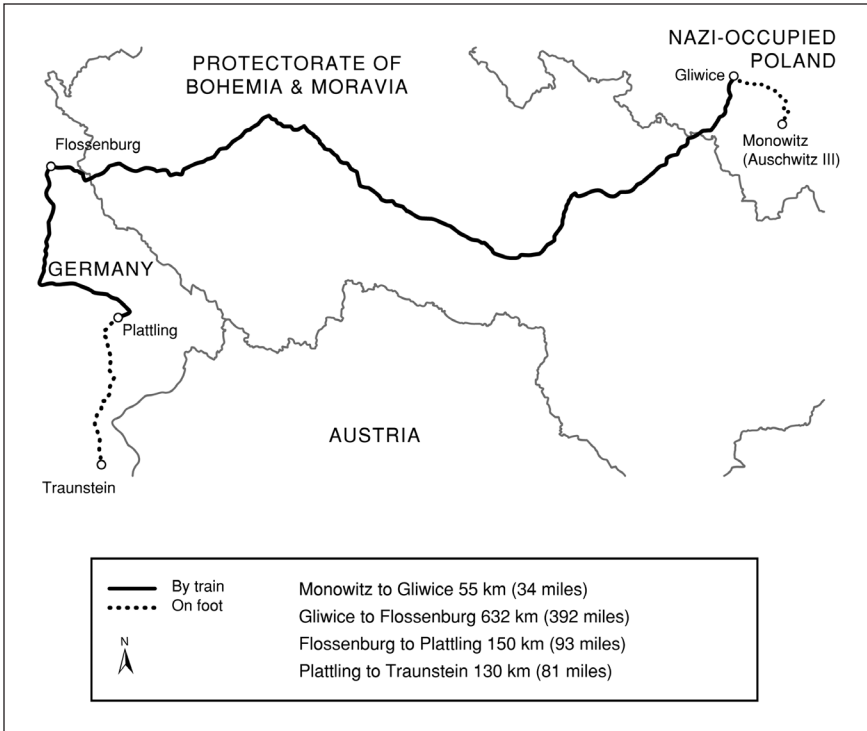
At nightfall, they stopped at a farm and were made to sleep in a barn. Prompted by the guard in charge, who hoped that if apprehended his life would perhaps be spared, food was collected from the villagers and distributed. For days, they walked through towns and villages, stopping to sleep in barns and warehouses along the way. They grew indifferent to the morning routine of seeing some fellow prisoners not wake up, and their number kept dwindling. Those attempting to escape or discovered hiding in the straw in the morning's sweep were shot on the spot. The number of their guards also shrank. Some, fearing for their lives and retribution for crimes committed, especially the ethnic Germans from outside the Reich, deserted and ran away when they could.¹⁷

On one evening in the final days of April, the column arrived at a farm. After a conversation with the farmer, the guard in charge ordered them to enter a wooden structure and locked them up for the

night with no food. Despite the ray of hope that the end of their ordeal was near, the possibility that he was headed to a killing place did not leave Chaim's mind. Being in Reich territory, exhausted, guarded by criminals with rifles in a chaotic time when a Jew's life did not matter much, had deterred him from his earlier thoughts of escapes. In addition, years of brutal captivity with no mercy made him obey orders blindly. No one dared to challenge a Nazi with a rifle, a menacing dog or a gas chamber. Constantly fearful, he did what he was told. He also knew that if he ran and was caught, being shot on the spot was assured. Yet the situation now seemed to have changed, and the reasons to run away made it worth the risk. Whispering, Chaim shared his thoughts with a friend who agreed to join an escape.

Examining the structure's walls beside which they rested, they saw several loose boards. Pushing one to make a gap and let their thin bodies pass through would not be too hard. There was a chance, however, that an armed guard was standing on the wall's other side, ready to shoot. The two waited until the others were asleep. Then, pushing the board and looking out first, they saw no one standing nearby. They quietly stepped out and began running into the dark night. Short of breath and strength they ran for a while through open fields, turning their heads at times to see if they were being chased. They had no clue where they were and in which direction they were headed. Exhausted, they reached a forested area, where they sat down to catch their breath.

When day broke, the two debated what to do. Walking to a village or wandering aimlessly was too risky. If they were noticed, the local police would be called, and they probably would be killed immediately. Having not eaten for days, finding food was first on their minds. In the distance they saw an isolated farmhouse. They approached the front door, carefully knocked and waited. An old man opened the door. His wife stood behind. The farmer and his wife stared in disbelief at the two dirty, skeletal men in striped clothing. In German, Chaim lied and said that they were prisoners who have been just liberated and were looking for food. They were let in. Sitting at a table and using dishes, it was the first time the two had eaten in days, with the kind of food Chaim had not seen since leaving Eberswalde – along with the domesticity he had not experienced in years.



14.3 Chaim's death march route.

After feeding them, fearing for their lives or maybe being good Samaritans, the farmer said that they were welcome to sleep in his barn for several days should they wish. Sounding sincere, he assured them that he had no interest in causing trouble and calling authorities. They debated what to do. What if the farmer was a Nazi sympathizer? After a discussion, they agreed that the safest thing for them was to stay in this isolated place for a few days and hope that the farmer and his wife would keep their word. They washed up, and the farmer's wife gave them civilian clothes.

On May 5, 1945, Chaim and his friend left the farmer's home. They got directions to the city of Traunstein and walked through forested areas, avoiding roads. After years in captivity dressed in striped

clothing, it felt strange to walk free in civilian clothes. Suddenly, through the trees they noticed a convoy of army vehicles, different from the German vehicles they were used to seeing, with stars marked on their sides. They knew at once that these were Americans. The two ran toward and waved. The convoy stopped. The two pointed to the numbers tattooed on their arms and shouted "*Yiedde*" (Jewish). Someone called from one of the trucks. A soldier talked to the two in Yiddish. Chaim fell to the ground crying. The soldier invited them to climb aboard. With teary eyes, they sat among the American soldiers as they rode into Traunstein.

On May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allies unconditionally. Chaim was a free man.