

Freddie Knoller - Desperate Journey: Vienna-Paris-Auschwitz

I was stunned looking at a bundle of letters and seeing the unmistakable, elegant handwriting of my father who perished in Auschwitz in 1944. He and my mother wrote over 100 letters to my brother Eric who emigrated from Vienna to the USA in December 1938. Eric died in 1996 and never disclosed that he had kept these letters dated 1938-1941. They were found by his widow when going through his personal effects. Why did he never tell me about the letters while he was still alive? Did he have the same guilt feeling all Holocaust survivors share in varying degrees? Why did it take me over 30 years to tell my family and the world what I went through? Is it the same guilt feeling?

My book, *Desperate Journey*, which was written with the help of my friend John Landaw, tells the story of a young, naïve boy, just 17 years old, forced to leave the strict parental home. There I was, like a bird leaving the nest for the first time, wanting to taste all the things which a boy, in normal circumstances, would not have been allowed to experience. My attitude of hope and optimism helped me to overcome fear and perils and was one of the reasons why I am still alive today.

My father was an accountant and quite strict. My mother loved life; she was very easygoing, always happy and very musical. She made sure that her three sons received musical tuition. My oldest brother Otto played the piano; Eric learned to play the violin, so naturally I had to learn the cello at the age of six. By the time I was ten, we performed on the stage and at various charity functions.

From early childhood, my family and I were subjected to anti-Semitism, for which the Austrians were so well known. I was set upon ever so often by Christian children on my way to school.

After the *Anschluss* (annexation of Austria) these attacks became even more virulent. On the night of 9 November 1938, when the Nazis burnt down all the synagogues, my parents insisted that we, the children, should emigrate.

I was the first one to leave, going illegally to Belgium. Eric was next and left for Florida, USA, having been supplied with an affidavit by a friend of the family. Otto was the last to leave our parents; he went illegally to Holland and from there to England. My parents did not want to leave, saying that they were too old for anything to happen to them. Father was 56 and mother 53.

My destination was Antwerp, where I was given the address of a diamond dealer, who helped me morally and financially. The Jewish Committee provided living

quarters which I had to share with two other refugees of about my age. In their company, I learned how to play poker, and how to smoke. They also introduced me to alcohol and bad women.

Luckily, this freedom was stopped when the Jewish community gave me the choice of either joining a camp for Jewish refugees or of being without further assistance from them. I decided to join the camp of Merksplas and later Exaarde, where I joined the camp orchestra.

When the Germans invaded Belgium in May 1940, everyone in the camp fled on foot to France. At the border, I was arrested by the French as an enemy alien and taken to St. Cyprien Internment Camp for the enemies of France, regardless of whether they were Jewish or real German Nazis. The food and hygiene at this camp were disastrous and soon typhus broke out. I escaped during the night, walking 10 km to the next town, Perpignan. From there, I proceeded to Gaillac, where my aunt, uncle and cousins lived.

In the meantime, the Germans had occupied Paris and the northern part of France, but Gaillac was still in the unoccupied zone, ruled by the Vichy Government. I became bored, craving for new adventure. I decided that I must see Paris, the town of my dreams.

My relatives fought with me and tried to stop me going into the 'Lion's Den'. However, I insisted and off I went. In Paris I became fascinated by the night life of Pigalle and earned my living by taking German soldiers to night-clubs, to brothels and cabarets. I earned a percentage, at these places, of whatever the soldiers consumed. I organised myself with false identification papers and became 'Robert Metzner' born in Metz, Alsace-Lorraine. I met all kinds of people: decent German soldiers, homosexuals, abusive Nazis and French collaborators. I met a wonderful Frenchman who worked in the Resistance. I met some very nice women and some tough prostitutes.

On one occasion, I was arrested by a Gestapo officer who claimed that he could accurately distinguish between the head of a Jew and that of a true Aryan. While he was telling me that, he went behind me, took my head between his hands and I felt his fingers start to trace, then stop and trace again round the circumference of my skull. He then agreed with my contention that I was born in Alsace-Lorraine, that my ancestors must have been of good German background. He could recognise this from the shape of my head. The officer warned me not to go back to Pigalle, but to work for the German Reich. From then on, I could not continue my work and in May 1943 I joined the Maquis, near Figeac, in south-west France and lived in an abandoned shepherd's hut on top of a hill. Among us were a number of Jews, quite a number of French Communists and some young people who did not want to work in Germany under the new law of '*Service du Travail Obligatoire*' (Compulsory Labour). Apart from political discussion and arguments, we did not do much resisting except for an attempt to blow up a German troop train. We did, however, work for the peasants and farmers in the region who paid us with food.

I had a relationship with a young girl from the next village, with whom I thought I was in love. Like a fool, I admitted to her in moment of lovemaking that I had false papers and that I was hiding because I did not want to work for the Germans. One day we had an argument and I told her that I did not want to see her again. A few days later, I was arrested by the French police. When I showed them my papers, they just laughed. They asked me for names in my Resistance unit and wanted to know where I came from. When they started to torture me, I told them that I knew nothing of a Resistance unit, but that I was a Jew from Vienna hiding up in the hills. They took me to the Gestapo and I was then taken to Drancy, the infamous transit camp for the east.

At the beginning of October 1943, my name came up for deportation to the east. We were taken to the railway station and 100 people were squeezed into each cattle wagon. There was not enough room for everyone to sit on the floor. We youngsters made room for the old people, women with their babies and the infirm. In the wagon there was one bucket with drinking water and one empty sanitary bucket. We travelled for three days and three nights to our destination. I will never forget the stench, the arguments, the screaming of the babies and the moans of those who were dying. I was squeezed against a middle-aged Frenchman called Robert, a gentle person who looked very much like my father. I took a liking to him and made him as cosy as I could. We became good friends. He told me that he was a doctor and I did not realise then that it is because of him that I am alive today.

When we arrived we saw a sign 'Osviecim' on the railway platform. We guessed that we were somewhere in Poland. The platform was full of SS with dogs and we saw some young people in striped prisoners' clothes.

The SS selected the younger people who were to walk to the camp, but the older men and women with their children were taken away by trucks. This was the time when we were taught German discipline through blows and killings.

We heard some alarming rumours about the older men, women and children transported by trucks, but very few believed them. Others, however, who gave credence to the rumours, killed themselves by walking straight into the electrical fences.

I realised that there were two choices: you could either give up and within 2-3 days you would be dead, or you could fight to live and try to adjust yourself to the situation 'by hook or by crook'. I chose the latter.

I did not look at others who suffered and moaned about hunger, or those who neglected their personal hygiene – a sign that they had given up. I had to take care of myself – I was number one. I had one mission only, to survive, in order to tell the world about the barbarism of the cultured people of Germany.

On a visit to the hospital, I saw my doctor friend, Robert, from the train. He told me that he had been put in charge of the camp hospital and as I took care of him in the train, he would help me with some extra food whenever possible. I was told to go to the hospital every evening when I returned from work.

At work, I had to carry cement bags weighing 25 kg on my back, day-in, day-out. To do this work and survive with the minimal ration of food we were getting was not possible.

People dropped like flies. The extra food I received from my friend Robert was surely the reason for my survival.

When the Russians approached Auschwitz, the whole camp was evacuated. The date was 18 January 1945. We were lined up in rows of five and were told that we would have to walk, and that anybody trying to escape would be shot. It was very cold and it was snowing.

We went westward, walking in our wooden shoes on icy, snow-covered roads. We were still in our striped, thin clothes. Many collapsed and were immediately shot on the spot. We had to take the corpses and throw them into the ditch next to the road. The SS surrounded each of our columns and were ready with their guns.

After walking for the whole day and part of the night, we reached a brick factory where we were allowed to rest and sleep under cover. Only half of us were still alive when we arrived at the factory. One in our group, a French political prisoner, did not wake up. He was dead, frozen stiff. I took his red triangle from his tunic, showing that he was a political prisoner; put it in my pocket hoping to exchange it later for the Star of David Insignia. Finally, we were taken to a railway station and squeezed into an open cattle wagon, standing room only. We thus travelled through Austria and Germany, seven days and seven nights, until we reached our destination. Nine people in our wagon died during the journey.

Our new camp, Dora-Nordhausen, was the place where the V1 and V2 rockets were manufactured beneath the Harz Mountains. We worked in the tunnels, pushing wagons on rails and carrying heavy metal objects. We experienced a lot of hangings of prisoners, Russian prisoners of war and even civilians, who were supposed to have committed sabotage. One night, the Allied planes bombed the entrance to the tunnels. Many of our comrades who worked there on the night-shift, died. The next day, we were given tools to repair the damage.

As the American troops were nearing our region, we were evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. There was no more food available, and the beatings stopped. The German SS disappeared, and we were now guarded by Croatian and Hungarian SS units. We dug into the ground to find some edible roots. Many collapsed from hunger and dysentery and died where they collapsed.

On 15 April 1945, British troops entered Bergen-Belsen. We were given hot milk with rice, which we devoured like wild animals. Many inmates died, having stuffed themselves with food which the stomach could not digest. A British officer asked for volunteers to go to nearby farms and bring back any food we could find. I joined this group, with a soldier carrying a gun. We searched for food, loaded it onto a trolley in view of the protesting farmer and his wife. When I found a large photo of Hitler hidden behind a wardrobe, I took a knife and cut the photo to pieces. The old farmer went red in the face and shouted at me: '*Du Sau Jud*' (You filthy Jew). I just could not stop myself.

After all that happened to me as Jew, my emotions overtook me and I sank the knife into his belly. We left the farm soon after this.

I returned to France. With the help of the American Embassy in Paris, my brother Eric found me in a little village where I was sent by the French government to recuperate. Our reunion was very emotional. Eric was a soldier in the American Army and was ordered by his Commanding Officer to search in all the concentration camps for our parents and myself. He went to Vienna and found that our parents were deported to Theresienstadt. He also told me that our brother Otto became a doctor, and lived in New York.

In 1947, I emigrated to the USA and became a naturalised US citizen. In 1950 I met my wife, Freda, an English girl, on a blind date. We got married on 31 December 1950. After two years in Baltimore, my wife became homesick and we made our way back to her parents in London. We have two daughters Marcia and Susie who were born in England.

I dedicate my story to my daughters, Marcia and Susie, and to my grandson Nadav.

© Aegis Institute

Testimony from *Survival: Holocaust Survivors Tell Their Story*

(Quill/Aegis, 2003) reproduced with kind permission of Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre. <http://www.holocaustcentre.net/>