

A Story of Survival

by

Josef-Harry Linser.

I was born Harry Linser on January 25, 1928 at No. 60 *Laufbergergasse* in Vienna's Second District. At that time, I had a family—a father, a mother, and a half-brother whose name was Max Redlich. In other words, Max and I had the same mother but different fathers as Johanna Redlich, our mother, was first married to a distant relative of hers by the name of Arthur Redlich. After divorcing him, she married Emil Linser in 1927; I was born a year later.

By the time I started school, we had moved to a basement apartment on the *Rudolf von Alt Platz*. *Tante* Mathilde, my Grandmother Linser's somewhat mentally challenged sister, boarded with us for a while. Now living in Vienna's Third District, instead of the predominantly Jewish Second District, I found myself in an entirely Gentile world, mainly because most of my schoolmates were Gentiles—another boy and I were the only Jewish kids in the class. And as the nanny, Fanni, who looked after my brother and me was an Austrian Catholic, who liked to take us to church, from time to time, my childhood was spent in mostly Gentile circles. Besides, I had no contact with the Jewish world, at that time, as my father's family had rejected him for marrying a divorced woman, something he was forbidden to do as a *Kohanim*.

In 1937, when I was nine years old, my father and mother were divorced. He and I then moved to *Volkertstrasse 3/4* in the Second District. It was there that I met the Jewish world for the very first time, the very religious world of my paternal grandparents

Johanna (Hanni) and David Linser, who belonged to *Agudath Yisroel*, a movement, founded in 1912 by some of Europe's most famous Orthodox rabbis and that, during the 1920s and 1930s, had become the political, communal, and cultural voice of those Orthodox Jews who were not part of Zionism's Orthodox Jewish *Mizrachi* Party.

Since my father now was accepted by his parents, they, in turn, introduced me to their way of living. As it was very different from the one I had been used to, all the food I ate was *kosher* and I had to go to *cheder*, the traditional elementary school where boys were taught the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language. In other words, I only went to places where Jews congregated.

My father was a *Ratenhändler*, a merchant, who worked in and around Vienna, selling clothing at discount prices on the installment plan. My grandfather and grandmother also were in the *schmatte* business; mainly selling yard goods from their home in the *Lessing Gasse* in Vienna's Second District.

Anyway, the first sign of the *Anschluss*, the impending annexation of Austria by the German *Reich*, was the announcement of a referendum that was supposed to determine whether Austria would remain an independent country or become part of Greater Germany. I was ten years old at the time and still can remember seeing signs in the parks and along the streets, asking people to vote against the latter. But the referendum never took place because the Nazis marched into Austria before it could be held. On March 12, 1938, I saw German tanks roll into Vienna and German troops march along its streets. And, when Hitler spoke on the *Heldenplatz*—the Heroes' Square—on April 2 of that year, he not only welcomed his "dear homeland" into the German *Reich*,

but also told the enthusiastic Austrians that they would become part of it and have the same rights as all the Germans, except for the Jews, of course.

Austria now was known as the “Ostmark” and you could see mobs of Brownshirts run through the streets. And, whenever they saw a pious Jew, having recognized him by his beard and the special dress he wore, they would tear off his hat and then make him scrub walls and sidewalks to remove any anti-German slogans. A lot of photographs were taken of those scenes at that time and, when I saw them much later, I realized just how deliberate the Nazis’ humiliation of people had been. In other words, you were a marked man if you looked like a Jew. I, as a ten-year-old, was not recognized as such because I didn’t wear a hat or any special “Jewish” clothing.

Then the Nazis started organizing the Austrians, telling them that the Jews were bad people, that they were stealing the Gentiles’ money, and so on. In their anti-Semitic weekly newspaper, the *Stürmer*, whose motto was, "*Die Juden sind unser Unglück!*" ("The Jews are our misfortune!"), they published horror stories about Jews, accusing them of regularly raping German women. As the paper was on display at every street corner, the Nazis had an easy time spreading these anti-Jewish sentiments among the Austrians who, being an ignorant lot believed all those lies and soon started hating all the Jews. And when Austrian boys had joined the *Hitlerjugend*, the Hitler Youth and had learned their song, "*Wenn's Judenblut from Messer spritzt, dann geht's nochmal so gut.*" ("When Jewish blood spurts from the knife, things go so much better"), they soon started carrying small knives with which they hoped to kill Jews. Some of the fellows in my class, who, by then, belonged to the Hitler Youth, caught me a few times and beat me up. I had tried to get away from them but wasn't always successful. They all were part of my

neighbourhood that, at that time, was still a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. I cannot deny that Nazi sentiments had not existed in Austria before the *Anschluss* because I often had heard people say, “Just wait until Hitler comes here! He is going to teach you Jews a lesson.”

Kristallnacht, the “The Night of Broken Glass,” happened on November 9, 1938. That was when the Nazis burned down all the Viennese synagogues, except one, and told non-Jews to boycott all the Jewish businesses. As that action had been triggered by the assassination in Paris of the German diplomat Ernst von Rath by the German-born Polish Jew Herschel Grynszpan, all the Jews had to suffer for it. I did not live far from the big synagogue in the *Tempelgasse* and can remember watching hoodlums carry the torah scrolls from the sanctuary into the street, throw them on the ground and then let large horses trample and shit on them. And the crowd stood by watching, shouting, laughing and having fun. Once the synagogues were gone, my grandparents got together with other Jews to pray with them in their own homes. .

At that point in time, many Jewish people also were taken into custody for no particular reason. I remember that the Nazis, one day, came to the house of my great-uncle Johann Eisinger to look for his son Erich, who was out playing football (soccer) with his Gentile friends. When they could not find him, they arrested his elderly father and his older brother Oskar, who had nothing to do with playing football. They took them both to the police station, where they first beat up Oskar and then sent him to the Dachau concentration camp. That was the first time we heard of a place where the lives of Jews were being threatened. Although the Nazis called confinement there *Schutzhaft*, protective custody, anyone who tried to escape from there was shot, even in those days.

Of course, if you had a chance to leave Austria you left. Yes, people with entry visas to other countries did leave but the majority of Jews remained in Vienna. Later, transports were organized to take youngsters to England, providing someone there was willing to guarantee his or her livelihood. In fact, my brother Max was on one of the last so-called *Kindertransports* that left Vienna just two weeks before the outbreak of World War II.

The Nazis' policy towards the Jews in Vienna's Second District that, prior to 1938, had been, predominantly, Jewish, was: "Let's take everything away from them and make their lives difficult." In that way, they thought, Jews could not "poison the atmosphere" for the Gentiles who, by then, outnumbered those living in the Second District. All sorts of restrictions then were imposed on us. We no longer could go to amusement centre such as the Prater, to movie houses, theatres or other public places, such as Vienna's parks that were solely reserved for Aryans. Even on streetcars I had to ride in the last car and was not allowed to occupy any of the seats. And, to clearly distinguish between Jews from Gentiles, a Jewish man had to adopt the name "Israel" as his first name while Jewish women had to take the name "Sarah." These names were prominently stamped onto everyone's identity card. And, any Jew above the age of ten had to wear the "Yellow Star," the Nazis' notorious badge of segregation. Inscribed with the word "*Jude*" in the centre, it had to be purchased by every Jew, who then had to sew it onto his or her outer clothing. And if you had two overcoats, the Yellow Star had to appear on both of them. Yes, we Jews had become second-class citizens without basic rights, even though nobody really knew what anyone's basic rights were.

By that time, my father had started working at the Vienna *Kultusgemeinde*, the Jewish community organization, a job he had taken over from his brother-in-law Julo Redlich, who was about to leave for Australia with his family. What Dad had to do there was to issue identity papers to Jews, work that gave him some protection.

When World War II broke out, 60,000 Jews out of the 180,000 who had lived in Vienna prior to 1938, were still there. My father never wanted to leave the country. Even though deprivation and humiliation had, by then, become our main concerns, he did not think that his life was in any danger at that time. But as soon as the war started, there were food shortages—sugar, oil, and fats were in short supply—and, although these basic items were on coupons, even for non-Jews, we got very few of them and, of course, none of the luxuries, such as eggs and chocolate. During all that time, we saw no signs of pity or sympathy for us among any of the Gentiles, except for one man we knew who, occasionally, brought us some food.

In 1940/41, a group of younger people, all of them tradesmen, were sent to Poland. Upon their return, that they told us they had built some barracks there. At that time, no one knew that those barracks would, eventually, house the entire Jewry of Europe. What we did realize for the first time was that by sending Jews to the East which, by then was German-occupied territory, the Nazis were systematically, making all German cities *Judenrein*, clean of Jews.

By the time I was thirteen, I was thrown out of my school and had to start working in a leather-goods factory that was formerly owned by Jews. I stayed on the job for about a year, which was a good thing as it gave me some kind of protection, at least temporarily sparing my father and me from being sent to the East. By 1940/41, some

people had indeed been deported to Łódź, formerly, Litzmannstadt, the second-largest Jewish ghetto after Warsaw in German-occupied Poland. Originally intended as a transit camp for Jews and Roma, it became a major industrial centre that provided supplies for Nazi Germany, especially for the German Army. Because of its remarkable productivity, the Łódź Ghetto inmates managed to survive until August 1944. Only then were they transported to Auschwitz.

The Nazis' basic premise for sending Jews to these ghettos was that the elderly would soon die there naturally because of the appalling living conditions, while the young ones could be used as slave labourers, at least, for the time being. At that time, we knew nothing about what ultimately would happen to Jews. All we did know was that we were helpless individuals who had been deprived of all self-esteem. Although I felt pretty miserable at the time, for some reason I remembered that, as a kid, I had attended a meeting of a Zionist organization called *Youth Aliya*, where a fellow had read some of Theodor Herzl's writings to us and had given us hope that we would, one day, go to Palestine and be treated like human beings.

On October 9, 1942, my father, my grandfather, my grandmother and I were told that we would be sent to a so-called "preferred ghetto." After receiving strict instructions as to what we could and could not take along, we packed our things in the one suitcase each person was allowed to bring along. Clearly marked with his or her name and address, these cases then were loaded onto a wheelbarrow and wheeled away. No horse-drawn carriages or cars were anywhere in sight. Those of us, who were to be sent to that

so-called “preferred” place called Theresienstadt (Terezin), then had to report to a gathering place that happened to be my former school in the *Kleine Sperlgasse*.

On October 13, 1942, in the middle of the day, we were loaded onto trucks. Watching us leave were a lot of Austrians who, shaking their fists, shouted “*G’schiet Euch Recht, Saujuden! Ihr verdient’s!*” (Serves you right, you dirty Jews! You deserve this!”) After being driven to a freight-car siding, we were loaded onto wagons.

Eight or nine hours later, we arrived at our destination where a new scene opened up for us in a place called Terezin. Formerly known as Theresienstadt, this Jewish ghetto housed about 60,000 people. Originally planned as a garrison by the Habsburg Emperor, Josef II, and named after his mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, construction had started in 1780 and ended ten years later. Even though Theresienstadt never was under direct siege, its total area, covering about four square kilometres, held close to 6,000 soldiers in peacetime and around 11,000 in wartime. During the second half of the 19th century the garrison was used as a prison and became a camp for political prisoners during World War I. Gavrilo Princip, the man, who assassinated the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in 1914, was held in Theresienstadt. He died there of tuberculosis in 1918.

Upon arrival, everyone was sent to separate living quarters—the men had to be with the men and the women with the women, even the elderly couples were split up. Being a youngster, I and other kids my age, were sent to a kind of youth hostel. As there were twelve of us in one small room, we, literally, lived on top of each other. The most precious possession I had brought with me was a mouth organ that had been given to me

as a kid of thirteen. But when it was taken away from me as soon as I got to Terezin, I felt really sad because I had loved it and, generally, loved music.

We then were organized into work gangs. I was assigned to a group that did gardening, mainly planting vegetables that were for the Germans and not for us to eat. And, even though we never had a day off from work, I did manage to see my father from time to time, usually late in the afternoon.

At the beginning of 1943, after I had been in Theresienstadt for close to three months, I developed intestinal typhus, a sickness brought on by the unsanitary conditions that existed in the camp. I, therefore, had to stay in the camp hospital for two or three weeks and, when I came out, I was glad that they had assigned me to a group that had to carry the food to the various barracks. That job really helped me to survive. Having lost a lot of weight during my sickness, I was glad to be close to food every lunch time. As I also helped unload potatoes, I could fill up with them, as well, and even bring some back to be shared with the others on *Erev Shabbat*, when we got together to bake bread and to prepare other food. Even though we only got black coffee for breakfast, as long as I was in Theresienstadt, we youngsters did get more and better food than older people, such as my grandparents. Malnourished and living under the most abominable hygienic conditions, they soon developed dysentery and died one year after arriving in Terezin.

. The only time we thought that there was a so-called “light at the end of the tunnel,” was when we heard the news about Stalingrad—Germany fighting against the Soviet Union for control of the city that now is called Volgograd. The battle, believed to have been one of the turning points of the war, had started in July 1942. But, by early February 1943, all German resistance had ceased and the German 6th Army had been

destroyed. We did not know any of these facts until after the war. However, at that time, we read in the *Voelkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party organ on display in all public places, that so and so many officers—they never mentioned the number of soldiers—had fallen for the *Fuehrer* and the Fatherland. That was when we got the idea that things might get better, one day. Also, as soon as Stalingrad had happened, the Germans opened a factory in the middle of Theresienstadt to print labels that were to be attached to fuel canisters. These labels stated that the canisters were insulated to prevent the fuel inside from freezing. Clearly, one of the difficulties the Germans encountered around Stalingrad had been frozen fuel.

Of course, no one could leave Theresienstadt. Some people had managed to escape and many had joined the underground movement. However, those who were caught were brought back to the camp and, to frighten and deter others, an *Appell*, a roll call, was organized on the parade ground where it was announced that the fugitives would be hanged.

The Czech people who lived close to Terezin hated the Germans as much as we did and, whenever they saw us at work, they would stop to talk to us. One day, they told us that a nearby village by the name of Lidice had been completely destroyed by the German armed forces as reprisal for the assassination by Czech partisans of Reinhard Heydrich, the German Deputy Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. We found out later that on June 10, 1942 all the male inhabitants of Lidice over the age of sixteen, 192 in all, were shot by the Germans and that all its women and children were sent to Nazi concentration camps where many of them were also killed.

The Germans allowed us to write postcards, as long as they stated no more than, “We are well and are doing fine.” One day, we got such a card from a fellow who had been with us in Terezin but had been sent to the East. On it he had scribbled in one corner the Hebrew word *namut*, which means, “We shall die.” After reading the card we could not understand what the guy meant and really thought that he either was depressed or off his rocker. At that time, we knew nothing about gas chambers and crematoria where people were being murdered. Yes, the Nazis were already working full-time killing Jews as early as 1942, but not to the same extent as they did later.

My father and I remained in Theresienstadt for two years. But on September 28, 1944 we were told to make our way to the freight train that stood on a siding inside the camp. Before being loaded onto the cattle cars, we each were given some drinking water. Towards evening, the transport of about 2,500 people started to move. With roughly one-hundred people in each car, it was pretty cramped, very cramped indeed, and no one could sit down. The wagons had no windows, just a few cracks that let in some air and also allowed us to look out. We passed all kinds of German towns, among them Stettin, now called Szczecin and in Poland and, after two days of travel we noticed that all the towns had Polish names. Then one night, around midnight, the train slowed down. And when it came to a halt we realized that we had arrived at our destination—a place called Auschwitz-Birkenau that was close to the Polish town of Oświęcim.

Ordered off the train, we immediately had to line up in rows, five deep. I could see a fence and, close to the fence, there were soldiers carrying machine guns. When one of our fellows, suddenly, panicked and started to make a lot of noise, I heard an S.S. man

say to someone, "Finish him off!" Immediately following his order, the man gave the "unruly" guy a couple of kicks with his boot and then strangled him with his bare hands. No more noise, no shooting. Nothing.

My father was in front of me when the line started to move slowly towards another S.S. officer and then stop. A man who, I found out later, was the notorious Dr. Mengele, then asked my father, "What's your profession?" And when my father replied, "I am a pharmacist," he motioned him to go off to the left. When I stood in front of that man, he did not ask me anything but sent me off to the right. At that time, I had no idea that I had passed the point of separation between life and death.

We then were told to run "on the double" through a gate a couple of yards away into the adjoining Birkenau camp, where people again were lined up and selected either to die or to live as slave labourers. I then saw a row of barracks in front of me and people looking out of the windows. That must have been forbidden because as the guards saw them they immediately shot them. Only much later did I find out that those guards, who wore S.S. uniforms, actually, were Ukrainians, not Germans who, although recruited as slave labourers, had been assigned to do guard duties. One of them told us to hand over our watches and rings. "You won't need any of those things, here," he said, "Just give them all to me." I had a ring; I can remember that I didn't care much about. So I gave it to him. Once I had done so, he pointed to a barrack and said to me, "Go over there to be deloused." What I saw on my way were chimneys spewing flames.

After entering a huge room, all of us were told to take off our clothes but to leave on our shoes and keep our belts. So we stripped and, while standing there naked, a very

fat S.S. man came towards us carrying a whip. As he did not want to touch our naked bodies with his hands, he just hit us with the whip. In other words, he was using it to express himself.

Seeing blood all over the floor, made everyone move back before being told to go to another large room where dozens of barbers, not only cut people's hair but also shaved off their body hair with razors. The barber, who was supposed to cut mine, then said to me in Yiddish, "I want your lousy shoes. Give them to me!" But I was determined to keep my shoes because they kept my feet warm. "Oh no!" I said to him, "you can't have them!" I then started to run, stopping only when I was sure I was out of that man's sight and had found another barber to cut my hair.

For the delousing process, we were given a tube of Kuprex, a strong disinfectant ointment that supposedly killed lice. After smearing the stuff all over our bodies, we were ordered to go under the showers—four men to one shower. Cold water came down for a while but stopped running before we could wash off the ointment. When we dared to complain they told us, "Just keep rubbing it all over your bodies." Not only was it very smelly but also burned your skin, especially if you had any open wounds.

Next, they ordered us to run to the place where we would get clothes, our KZ uniforms. Of course, they did not fit. A tall person got pants that were too short and someone short got pants that were too long. Just as issuing us with ill-fitting clothes was part of the Nazis' humiliation process, so was setting up a factory in Auschwitz to make underwear from sacred Jewish prayer shawls.

It was well past midnight before we were properly dressed as concentration-camp inmates. So when we saw how ridiculous we looked in these outfits, we could not help laughing. We then had to run to our barracks—huge structures equipped with tier upon tier of wooden slabs. I believe there were at least 2,000 people in each one. Tired and feeling miserable, we tried to go to sleep. But as there was only one blanket for six of us, everybody started pulling. Those in the middle were okay. But those at the outer edge were out of luck.

The first night ended at five o'clock in the morning when everyone had to be up and ready to be counted. One of the first things I had learned, by then, was never to draw attention to myself and never to look into the eyes of an S.S. man or a KAPO, a camp policeman. In other words, whenever I was confronted by one of them, I would try to make myself invisible. So, as I stood before that particular guard, waiting to be counted, being tall for my age, I crouched down a bit to make myself small and thus avoid his gaze. Once the counting was over, the block eldest, the man in charge of our barracks, warned us, once again, that he would kill anyone who had not yet deposited his jewellery in the corner of the room. Well, some people got caught. But as I had none to deposit, I had nothing to worry about.

Before getting anything to eat, we were handed a large bowl, the kind in which you would wash yourself. Into it they poured some thin soup, telling us, "Okay, here is the food for the twenty-five of you." We just looked at each other wondering how we were all going to drink from one bowl. As there was no other handout of rations, you were supposed to have your belly full after just one slurp. I'd say, we looked more like animals at the trough.

Another thing I remember about that first morning in Auschwitz was one of our fellows asking an inmate who was in Auschwitz a few days, "Could you please tell us, where are the people, who were with us on our transport from Theresienstadt and were sent to the left side?" And he said, after pointing in the direction of the smoking chimneys I had seen earlier, "They left yesterday. They're now in Heaven."

Until that day, we had had no idea that the majority of the people, including my father, who had gone to the left upon their arrival in Auschwitz, already had been gassed. Nor did we know that once "selected" meant immediately going into the gas chambers. So, after hearing what had happened to our people, especially, to my Dad, all my thoughts began to concentrate on one thing: Get the hell do I get out of this place of death! I got to see those buildings up close, many years later, when I was in Auschwitz, together with my son, my daughter and one of my grandchildren, to show them what the place had looked like.

To be selected for the work you were supposed to do, we then were lined up and each of us had to say what his profession was. I had one friend who was a blacksmith and another one who was a carpenter. So, after looking around, I picked "agricultural helper," an occupation I did not think was represented in Auschwitz.

Next, they sent me for my physical examination. So, after I had taken off my trousers and lifted up my shirt, they looked at my body to see whether I had any visible defects or open wounds. Those who did the checking, apparently, were the representatives of the various manufacturers who had come to Auschwitz to recruit their slave labour. Each day, a group was chosen and, by the end of the week, they had put together a transport of about 5,000 people and I was among them. We then were told that

we were going to the *Reich* but none of us had any idea where in the *Reich*. What was important to all of us was to avoid meeting up with characters who might want to kill us and to always look fit enough to be able to perform the type of work they likely would want you to do.

Before leaving Auschwitz on foot, everyone was given one loaf of bread, the first solid food any of us ever received. That was quite something because I had seen what had gone on in the past when there had been a chance to get hold of something to eat. The people in charge of distributing it just killed those who had done anything they did not like, usually by clubbing them to death with a stick as big as a baseball bat.

On October 9, 1944, about seven months before the end of the war, we walked out of the Auschwitz camp to the strains of march-music played by a band of Jewish inmate musicians. And, after being loaded on to covered cattle cars, we thought we were headed west, past Prague in the direction of Vienna.

Instead, we arrived, two days later, in Kaufering near Landsberg, Bavaria, in a camp where prisoners, most of them Jews, provided the necessary labour to build an underground factory for the production and assembly of German fighter aircraft. The job to which I was assigned was carrying fifty-kilo bags of cement on my back to a spot, about forty or fifty meters away, to open each bag and pour the contents into a pipe leading to a churning cement mixer. It was only after the war when I found out and even received pictures from the Germans about it, that the cement was used to build thick concrete walls to protect the inner part of the aircraft factory from bombs.

I worked every day from five o'clock in the morning until six or seven o'clock in the evening. For breakfast, we got coffee, which was just water. For lunch, they gave us a

quarter of a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese, a ration that I ate right away as I saw no point in saving it for later because someone surely would have stolen it from me. I never took chances of that happening as my philosophy was: What's in my belly is in my belly. Once I found a piece of bread in the snow and it was covered in mold, I cleaned it best I could and ate immediately. It had a strange taste but later I found that it was a type of penicillin. I vowed that if I ever have plenty of bread to eat I would be ready to leave this world.

Yet, I was aware that these meagre rations would not sustain me for long. So, to prevent being selected to die if they thought I was too weak to work, I decided to do something to improve my situation. My only possessions at that particular time were my belt and my shoes. When I found out that the fellow who oversaw the evening food distribution was interested in my shoes, I said to him, "Listen, I am willing to give them to you. In exchange, could you give me 30 soup portions (1 per day), not skimmed off the top but from the bottom of the pot where there are a few potatoes and other foodstuffs." He agreed and, after making the deal, I believed I would have a better chance to survive. What I had not realized at the time was that by letting my shoes go I had endangered my life in other ways.

The soup, together with food that, incidentally, was better and more plentiful than what we had been given in Auschwitz, kept me going for a week. That was when the fellow to whom I had given my shoes brought me a pair of clogs, footwear similar to what the Dutch wore—slippers with wooden soles and a leather strap. I put them on, without socks, of course.

A couple of days later, I developed an infection in my right knee. It swelled up and, as I couldn't walk, I had to report sick. It was in January, 1945 when I went to the so-called "camp hospital," where a team of Hungarian-Jewish doctors told me they would have to operate. Of course, they had neither surgical instruments nor operating facilities of any kind. With four people holding me down, one of them took a knife, held it over a fire to sterilize it, cut open my knee and, actually, squeezed out the pus that had accumulated. I screamed because the pain was excruciating. And, as they had no bandages to cover the wound, they simply wrapped toilet paper around it before sending me back to the barracks.

I could walk, but as it hurt to walk, I had to lie down, knowing full well that others with injuries or an infection similar to mine, eventually, became so weak that they developed dysentery and died. I can remember that, at one time, there had been about fifty fellows in my barrack but that five or six corpses were taken outside every night and piled on top of each other, before being loaded onto trucks and driven away.

Two to three weeks after my knee operation, spotted typhoid fever broke out in Camp No. 4, the camp I was in. The whole place was immediately closed and no one was allowed in or out—no German, no Jew. We all were under quarantine and no work was being done. Three to four weeks later, most of the boys, my friends who had been with me in Theresienstadt, were either close to dying or already had died of this highly contagious disease that, generally, is spread by lice. And there were plenty of lice crawling around and hiding in our blankets. But we were not afraid of lice because, as soon as someone had died, we would grab his blanket just to keep warm. The quarantine lasted for about five weeks. By then, no more than forty of us were left in the camp out of

about 2,000 inmates. I was surprised that I had managed to keep going. Even though my wound was still festering, it had started to heal, despite the existing unsanitary conditions.

Throughout the time we were in the Kaufering Camp, we could see American bombers and fighter planes overhead and hear cannon fire in the distance. Knowing that German cities were being bombarded, day after day, did give us some satisfaction and made us believe that we might have a chance to make it out of there, one day. But the story goes on....

Then a lot of new people, including some Lithuanian Jews with whom we had worked on the same project, arrived at the Kaufering Camp, likely because the Nazis had evacuated the forced-labour camps close to such large industrial towns as Munich that was being heavily bombarded. Other newcomers were a group of seventeen- and eighteen-year-old Ukrainian slave labourers.

Among these Ukrainians was one guy with whom I struck up a kind of friendship. How did we communicate? I spoke to him in Czech which I had learned in Theresienstadt while working together with Czech fellow inmates, and he spoke to me in Russian. One day, he came to me and, unbelievably, brought me food! Even though it was dirty food, it was food—potatoes peels that someone had thrown out. After washing the potatoes peels, we strung them on a wire and put it in the oven, roasted them and then ate them. They actually turned to charcoal but it was an unspeakable treat. After that, I went into a kind of partnership with the fellow. He would supply me with food and I would provide him with know-how about such matters as how to do the work the Germans wanted us to do, what not to do, and, generally, how to arrive at the right decisions. That was exactly what he and I did until the very end.

By late April 1945, when the U.S. armed forces were getting closer and closer, the S.S. began to evacuate the Kaufering complex and to send the prisoners on what later became known as the “death marches.” Driven along like cattle, those who could not keep up the pace were shot or beaten to death by their guards. So when they told us to assemble at the gate of the camp, I said to my Ukrainian friend, “Listen, we are not going to do that. We are in no condition to go on any march. We are too weak and, should we fall down, we’ll get a bullet in our necks. Forget it.” And, even though the Germans kept announcing over the loudspeakers that they were going to blow up the camp, we stayed put, together with a few dozen others, Jews and non-Jews. We slept in the sick bay where there still was some straw and a few blankets and, even though we were given no food, my Ukrainian friend, unbelievably, found us some cheese and some bread.

Two days later, another announcement came over the loudspeakers: “We are going to blow up the camp!” We also were told to walk to a train standing about half a kilometre away from the camp entrance and to take with us anyone who was too sick to walk there on his own.

I asked my friend, “What are we going to do now?” And he replied, “We’ll have to leave because, this time, it looks as if they mean business.” I found out much later that, as soon as we had left Kaufering Camp No. 4, the S.S. set fire to the barracks, killing all the prisoners who had been too ill or too weak to be moved.

When we got to the train that consisted of about twenty or thirty open carriages, we noticed that the army men who had escorted us there did not come with us but remained behind. It took at least two days before the train started to move. Once it did, it

inched forward for no more than a couple of yards, stopped, went for a couple more yards, and stopped again.

Meanwhile, the war was raging all around us. We could hear cannon fire and see bombs being dropped from planes. Yet, the train hadn't moved more than a couple of kilometers away from the camp. Suddenly, it stopped on a railway siding close to a wooded area. Before long, four or five planes appeared and started circling above us, coming close enough for us to hear the tut-tut-tut of their machine guns. Just then, I heard one of the German guards shout, "Take cover, everyone, take cover!" After seeing him and the other Germans jump off the train and run into the forest, I said to my friend in Czech, "This is the sign! Let's go. Let's get out of here." And just as we were about to make our move, one of the planes started strafing the train with machine-gun fire. A lot of people got killed, mostly those who were half-dead already and unable to move. Luckily, my friend and I made it into the woods. Towards evening, when the air attack was over, we heard a German guard shout, "Everyone! Get back on the train! We'll shoot you if you don't." But I told my friend, "Keep going! Now every second counts!"

We didn't go back to the train but kept moving deeper and deeper into the forest. We had no idea where we were and what time it was until we heard a church bell strike once, twice and three times. That was when we could figure out that it was three o'clock in the morning and that we were near a village with a church. Before long, my friend decided to look around the forest. He soon returned, bringing with him some cheese and other food that, we later figured out, must have been left behind by retreating German troops who had briefly hidden in the forest.

We waited until it got dark before venturing out of the woods. Walking towards the village, we saw a barn at the side of the road. We walked inside and, when we found piles of hay in the loft, I thought we had found the perfect place to get some sleep. But my friend had other ideas. "You stay here," he said. "I'll go into the village to get us some food." Some time after midnight, he was back, bringing with him a jug of milk, a piece of "*Speck*"—bacon—and lots of bread. Oh, my God! We started to eat and it did not take long before we both felt sick. Now we had food but could not eat it because it was much too rich for starved people like ourselves..

A couple of days later, when we both were feeling better, I told my friend that I would stay in the barn until the Americans or the British came to liberate me. But he said, "No, we need more food, a few clothes and even some money. I know where to get all that. But, this time, I want you to come with me." I agreed and was surprised when he took me to one particular house in the village. There, he knew exactly where to find the key to the cellar and, once we were down there, we found food, clothing and even a trunk in which to pack all that loot. We then headed back to the barn in the moonlight.

We suddenly saw a German soldier on a bicycle coming towards us. He stopped and asked if we have seen American tank tracks in the village. He continued to ask us who we were and told us that he has seen a number of similar "Gestaltten" in the area. The soldier continued telling us that he was cut of from his unit and does not want to be taken prisoner of war. I advised him to throw away his rifle and uniform and come along with us. We were afraid that he would report seeing us endangering our hide outs and facilitate possible recapture. He did not accept our advice and left us. We continued to the barn

hide out waiting for the morning to come. In the morning we heard a man's voice call out, "Hello! Who is up there?" Before long, he appeared and, when he saw us lying there and seemingly had recognized the stuff that was lying about, I knew he had to be the farmer from whom we had stolen it. My first thought was to get out of there but I then decided to make up a nice story. "Listen," I said to him, "When we arrived this morning, we saw five people run away from here." But all he said to us was, "Why don't you go into the village? The Americans are already there."

The farmer then invited us to his house for breakfast. That was when my friend said to me, "You go with him. I'll be on my way to look for my own people, other Ukrainians." I was sorry to let him go. He had been my good and loyal companion who, actually, saved my life. I never saw him again but heard much later that he and other Ukrainians had been sent back to the Ukraine where the Russians had killed all of them because they had worked for the Germans during the war.

When the farmer noticed my open wound, he said to me, "Listen, you can't run around like that. There is a hospital, a former German Army hospital, close by that is run by Benedictine monks (St. Otilien, close to the village of Eresing). Let's go there so that they can take a look at you."

So I walked with him through the village. All of a sudden, I noticed piles of rifles and steel helmets lying around—all stuff that the German soldiers must have thrown away. And when I saw fifty or sixty people with their hands up coming towards us, I said to myself, My God, they are Germans, German prisoners-of-war! Wondering why no one was guarding them, I suddenly saw an army tank appear. Sitting on it was a fat black man holding a cigarette in one hand and a machine in the other. And I noticed that he was

wearing a uniform I had never seen before. My God! I said to myself, he's an American! I've finally made it!

After the farmer had deposited me to the entrance to the hospital, a Christian monk took me inside. Filthy as I was, he put me in a bath tub, washed and cleaned me up. He then took me to his quarters, where he put me in a bed made up with white linen sheets and an eiderdown. I slept there for at least a day. I know exactly what day it was. It was the 29th of April, 1945—the day I was reborn, the day I consider my second birthday. I shall never forget it. When I woke up, the monk said to me, “Many of your people were here and now are billeted nearby.” He then directed me to a place that was covered with piles of straw where there was food to eat, mostly *Griesbrei*, which is a kind of porridge. Suddenly, a Frenchman appeared. After telling us that he was a former prisoner-of-war, he said, “The Americans have put me in charge of the hospital and we'll requisition a few German places where you'll get all the medical attention you need.” Listening to him, it occurred to me that I had been lucky enough to be among the first to be liberated.

Having weighed no more than forty-two kilos upon arrival in St. Ottilien near the village of Eresing, just a few kilometers east of Kaufering in Bavaria, I remained there convalescing and being fed well enough to gain sufficient weight to move on two months later.

In August, 1945, I, therefore, decided to go to Vienna. Upon arrival there, I discovered that the only forces occupying the city were the Soviets. However, a couple of months later, it was split up into five zones—the Soviet, the American, the British and the French—the First District (the city centre) being patrolled by the soldiers from all four occupation forces. I mainly had come to Vienna to see if any members of my family

had come back. I found no one except for Flora Ebner, a friend of my father's, who had survived because she was married to a Christian man.

While in Vienna, I also went to the house, Volkertstrasse 3/4, where I had lived prior to my deportation. When the wife of our concierge saw me, she shook her head and exclaimed, "Jessas Na San's durch den Rost g'flogen?" (Jesus Christ, how did you ever manage to slip through that fiery web?) In other words, she could not believe and almost was put out by the fact that I had survived. That's when I came to the realization that I could not remain Vienna. There were still plenty of Nazis in Vienna at the time. Some were caught and had a rough time, while others remained unpunished and unharmed. The ones caught by the Russians were taken to exhume the bodies of Russian soldiers buried in the parks of Vienna and transferred to mass graves in Vienna.

I stayed with Flora and Karl Ebner in the *Hollandstrasse* 2nd District in Vienna for seven months, until February 1946, not far from the Sperl Schule which was the point of concentration of Jews being deported to the east in 1940-1942. I got in contact with other Jewish returnees. We assembled in Vienna's Rothschild Hospital where we met Asher Ben-Natan, a man from Palestine, and an ex-Viennese who we knew by the name of Arthur – he later became the first Israeli ambassador to what was then West Germany. He gave each of us twenty US dollars, he advised us to go to the Displaced Persons camps near Salzburg and to make contact with some of the people who were living there. "Together with them," he assured us, "we'll get you to Palestine." At that moment I knew that I wanted to go to Palestine. Yes, Palestine was the place for me as remaining in

Europe no longer was an option. We were organized in Vienna and Thereseinsdat as a Zionist group and the idea of Palestine was not new to us

I left Vienna in February 1946 to join other groups in DP camps in the American zone in Austria near Linz, Salzburg and Innsbruck and then over the border to Northern Italy, to Milano and to a village called Tradate. There we got prepared for Aliya.

It was shortly after I had arrived in Italy that I managed to establish contact with my mother in England, I believe, it was through the British Consulate. By then, she too knew my whereabouts, having seen my name on one of the lists of Holocaust survivors published at war's end by all Jewish newspapers. It was my second cousin, Lesley Wyle (née Ilse Eisinger) who told me many years later that, she too had seen my name on such a list and, actually, had looked for me, if in vain, while she was in Munich between 1945 and 1947, working for the U.S. Army of Occupation. In that connection, I would like to quote an excerpt from a letter Lesley wrote to her parents in January 1946:

“....I visited the Jewish Committee [in Munich] last Thursday and, looking through a list of former concentration camp inmates, who had returned to Vienna, I was very pleased to find a familiar name, i.e. that of Harry Linser, (Born in 1928), whose given address was *Grosse Mohrengasse*. Although my search was not successful, I was, nevertheless, happy to have located little Harry and shall let Hansi [Harry's mother], who is in England, know about it. Rest assured that I shall do what I can to help. After all, things always did go well for me.....”

We left Italy from a small fishing harbor, Savona, on 19th of June 1946 on board a crowded ship named Wedgewood. However, we were caught by the British at sea and

towed into the port of Haifa arriving there on the 27th of June 1946. They put us in a detention camp – Atlit - where we stayed through July. I was stung by a scorpion and was released by the British in mid July for medical treatment in Haifa.

I went to the absorption center in Bat Galim in Haifa. I was treated for the scorpion bite and then started working in the kitchen of Beit Halozot to prepare food to the immigrants held on the ships in Haifa Harbor. At that time I went to visit my great uncle Rudolf and great aunt Grete who lived in Tel Aviv.

On the 11th of August 1946 I went to kibbutz Dorot. There I met friends who I last saw in Theresenstadt who were convinced in the idea of kibbutz life. I decided to stay there performing various jobs in the field of agriculture and other Kibbutz activities. I was determined to learn a trade and the opportunity to join the newly established Israeli Air Force rose while I was part of the kibbutz during the war of Independence of Israel and so I left the kibbutz in December 1947.

Because my school studies were in Austria were interrupted by the Nazis, they threw me out of school, I had to bring myself to the level of High School Diploma. I sat days and weeks to digest the material. I was accepted in the air force and sent for training in one of the air force's technical schools. There I completed my studies and attended an air craft engine course successfully. I read many books on the subject and after completion was sent to one of the air force bases to work on engine overhaul and maintenance. I stayed in that camp to work on Spitfires and other aircraft engines and used as guidelines the technical literature available.

In late 1951 while I was already considering leaving the Air Force, I met Kochava, the woman who I later married on the 25th of August 1952 and with whom I

had 2 kids, my son Ron who was born in February 1954 and my daughter Anat who was born in February 1958.

I left the Air Force at the end of 1952 as technical staff-sergeant to join the newly established Israeli airline El-Al, first as a mechanic, then as an instructor and finally as an aircraft inspector. My knowledge of English helped me a lot in reading the various manuals on the subject of aircraft maintenance. It was at that time, 1953 that I visited my mother, for the first time since the war.

My advancement in El-Al was fairly fast and in 1954 became manager of the inspection department and later appointed chief inspector. I participated in many courses on aircraft maintenance on the Bristol Britannia aircraft and later on the Boeing 707 and 767 aircraft. Between 1964 and 1969 I moved to New York and served as El-Al company technical representatives in the US. I also represented El-Al at the Boeing Company in the Seattle plant in the state of Washington.

I became manager of Maintenance and later Director of Air Craft Maintenance in 1969. I continued in the technical departments until 1981 and then started in the commercial division of the company as El-Al representative for Germany until 1988 when I became company Auditor until my retirement in 1993 serving El-Al for 41 years.