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I was born on July 28, 1930 in Trutnov and lived at 443 Rokytanskeho Ulice in Nachod (Vychodocesky kraj, zeme Cechy). My father, Dr. Karel Kraus was born in 1891 in Nachod, attended a monastic gymnasium in Broumov (Braunau) and received his medical diploma from the University of Vienna in 1910. He was a general practitioner whose numerous patients ranged from peasants living in the surrounding villages, to wealthier merchants and factory owners of the region. My mother (nee Goldschmid) was born in 1898, also in Nachod. Both parents came from large families and or relatives lived in several countries in Central Europe. They were fluent in both Czech and German, but I considered Czech my mother tongue, especially since I attended the first four grades of the local elementary school. Nevertheless my "nurse" (Kinder-freulein) until my eighth year was German-speaking from Halbstadt in the Sudetenland. We lived comfortably as members of the middle class in this small, industrial town (predominantly textile), surrounded by a pleasant rolling countryside dotted by villages near the mountains, that ring Bohemia. My mother took me to Prague fairly often to visit many of our relatives who lived in the capital.

As we lived right on the border with Germany where all the fortifications were under construction, we were evacuated inland to Hlinsko during the 1938 mobilization until the Munich crisis was over, at which time we again returned to Nachod. When the German army crossed the border in the dawn hours of March 15, 1939, and the frozen soldiers camped on the main square in the snow in front of my aunt's windows, she became their first victim. By taking her own life she undoubtedly saved herself a great deal of suffering; in her advanced age survival would have been unlikely. In September 1941 we were evicted from our villa (where we were living with two other families since the middle of 1940) and forced to live in a single room in a without running water in the Zidovska Ulice.

On December 12, 1942 we were sent to the Terezin ghetto in the CH transport (my number was 320) from Hradec Kralove, the district collecting place. In Terezin I first lived with my mother in L-425; and the following March I moved to a "Heim", dormitories for boys in B-IV (Hanoverska kasarna). In June I was given an abridged bar-mitzvah. In

September the "Heim" was moved to somewhat better quarters in Q-609. This "improvement" did not last very long; on December 12th our family was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. For the first six months we were in so-called Familienlager B 11.b., my number was 168497, my father's 168496 and my mother's 71253. In June 1944 my mother was shipped to Stutthof; after only two months she was sent to a near - by camp Danzig-Praust. In November of the same year she was returned to Stutthof due to illness and perished there in January 1945. My father, who was not well at the time of the liquidation of the Familienlager, was sent to the gas chambers on July 11, 1944.

On July 6 I was one of ninety boys between the ages of 14 and 16 selected by Dr. Mengele and sent to the Maenner lager (B.11.d.) where we were housed on the punishment block number 13 under the command of Bednarek. Eventually I was moved into another barrack and worked in the Unterkunft, an assignment that gave me an occasional opportunity to see neighboring camps. On several such messenger sorties I was able to communicate with, and even assist, in a minor way, recently arrived prisoners from Terezin.

In January 1945, as the eastern front advanced towards Auschwitz, we were evacuated; first we walked for about three days westward to a railway station. Those unable to walk were shot. A four-day journey in open rail cars followed and we arrived in Mauthausen. From there we were shipped to Melk. Most of us younger boys were assigned to peeling rotten potatoes. As the front advanced we were sent back to Mauthausen and from there (at the end of April 1945) walked to Gunskirchen. There we were liberated by the U.S. Army on May 7th. The very next day I was transported to a hospital in Hoersching. In mid-June repatriation started: first by steamer to Melk (where we stayed briefly in the same camp), then by train to Wiener Neustadt. From there we walked to Bratislava. On June 28th, 1945 we took a train to Prague. There I learned that my mother did not survive. After a few days several of us were sent to a sanitarium in Stirin, I left there in August to live with a friend of my parents in Ceska Skalice. There I had a tutor who helped me to study. In September I moved to Nachod and entered the fourth year of the Gymnasium. I lived with friends of my parents who survived the camps, but lost their son who was my age.

In the spring of 1948 many Jews started to leave the country. My guardian arranged to send me out of the country, with the aid of the Joint Distribution Committee, an American-Jewish organization that sponsored resettlement of Jewish war orphans. At the end of July I was to travel with a group of boys leaving from Prague via England, to Canada. As my papers were not ready in time, the group left without me by train to London, where I caught up with them by plane. We sailed

from Southampton on the S.S. Aquitania. We landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we were introduced to coca-cola and dazzled by all the large cars we only saw in American films. From Halifax we went by train to our respective destinations. A few of us arrived in Montreal in mid-August. The first few weeks we stayed in a Jewish Center while Joint searched for families that accommodate us and arranged further training, education and also adoption. A cousin of mine who lived in New Jersey came to Montreal the very first week I arrived there and registered me with the United States consulate for immigration; at that time the Czech quota had a 16-months long waiting period. Then I enrolled in the last grade of a nearby Baron Bynh High School. Although I studied English back home I had great difficulties at first to distinguish between chemistry class and Shakespeare's plays. Nevertheless I did graduate the following June by passing the provincial examinations. I was extremely fortunate to be allowed to continue studying, the only one, in fact, of the group that I arrived with. In September of 1949 I enrolled at McGill University to study architecture. A year later the U.S. consulate notified me that I was eligible for an immigration visa. As it was too late to switch to another university, I postponed leaving Canada until the following year and finished the second year at McGill. I entered the United States in September 1951 and two weeks later I started at the School of Architecture of Columbia University in New York. I lived with my cousin's family in Midland Park, New Jersey until I graduated, at which time I moved to Greenwich Village in New York and started working for an architectural firm in Rockefeller Center.

I was not altogether happy in the United States and soon looked for opportunities to return to Europe. After working for two years I saved enough money to undertake what I saw as the six-month grand tour of Western Europe, to learn more about its culture, art and architecture. On September 1st 1957 I sailed on a French ship from New York for Plymouth and criss-crossed Europe in a Volkswagen until June of the following year. Returning to New York as originally planned did not appeal to me and instead I accepted a position with an architect in London. In October of 1959, still unwilling to return to my job in the United States, I found a job with a Swiss architect in Geneva. There I met Ilana, then a student at the medical school and we were married in May 1963 (in Tel Aviv and Geneva). Our honeymoon trip took us to Prag and Nachod at a period when Czechoslovakia was still under Stalinist regime.

Fortified by a wife I finally decided to make the trip back to America. After a brief visit to South America to see the only uncle who was not killed by the Nazis, we settled in Brooklyn. For three years we lived in an apartment of the hospital where Ilana did her internship and residency. Our first daughter Dana was born there in 1965. We became aware that

New York was not the ideal place to bring up children when both parents work and after a brief search we moved to Brookline, Massachusetts, in June 1967. During the first winter snow storm of that same year our second daughter, Tamara, was born. In the Boston area we found an atmosphere that was conducive to our professional development and allowed us to enjoy many of the things we appreciate, such as the availability of good schools for our children, concerts, skiing, hiking and an urban environment reminiscent of Europe. We were also fortunate to spend many vacations abroad and return to Czechoslovakia six more times. At present I am employed by a large architectural firm with a national reputation for good design and Ilana works for a health maintenance organization where she is chief of pediatrics in a neighborhood center. Our children had the benefit of an excellent education (Brown and Cornell) and Dana is a second year medical student at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

My memory of the war years is rather faded, though I am always aware of it and think about it more and more as I grow older. From Birkenau, I only recall Misha Gruenwald; from Goldberger and Hoersching Honza Schtrebinger as Gorilla and the Hertzes, although Harry Goldberger and Misha Gruenwald are mentioned in my old diaries written soon after my return to Nachod. My integration into "normal" society can never be complete as one is unable to share those war experiences with the people that one meets in one's daily life, whether professional or social. It remains essentially personal and private, but it is always there. So far I have not succeeded to fully share those thoughts even with those few who have similar experiences.

Background

During World War II millions of European Jews were killed, most of them by a diabolically organized machinery planned by the Third Reich. Some victims were slaughtered near their homes, others were transported from camp to camp, before finally meeting their death. Those few who survived were likely to have passed through several ghettos or concentration camps and experienced one or two forced marches towards the end of the war. As they endured combined hardships of forced labour, starvation and disease and passed through "selections", their numbers dwindled. Thousands perished even after they were liberated: from disease and hasty intake of food, which their bodies could not tolerate. Repatriation was often difficult, and fraught with danger and disappointments. The subject of this narrative is the forced wandering of a group of boys from the Ghetto Terezin (Theresienstadt) in Bohemia to a camp near a small village in Austria by the name of Gunskirchen.

The Ghetto in Terezin was established in the fall of 1941 and during the next 18 months all the Jews from Bohemia and Moravia were deported there. Occasionally Jews from other countries were sent to Terezin; they came from Germany, Holland, France and even Denmark. Only a fraction of those sent to Terezin remained there until the end of the War; most were shipped to the "East". The "East" most often meant Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Each transport consisted of approximately 2,500 people crowded into sealed cattle cars. Upon arrival at the ramp in Auschwitz, those who survived the trip were confronted by the infamous Joseph Mengele who sorted them according to their usefulness to the German Reich. Those who were fit for work were sent into one of several compounds for storage, processing and further shipment to forced labour camps. Children, the aged and sick were usually sent directly to the gas chambers.

There were several exceptions to this gruesome routine, namely two transports from Terezin in September 1943, two in December 1943 and two in May 1944. All ended in a camp labeled BII.b and called Familienlager, the family camp. The reason for this name was that the Germans were preparing for the possibility of an inspection by the International Red Cross, and wanted to be in a position to demonstrate that entire families were living in the Auschwitz concentration camp, thus countering the belief that those unfit for hard labour were killed in gas chambers. In March 1944 the two September transports (about 5,000 persons) were suddenly transferred to an adjacent camp and during the following night all except a handful were taken to the gas chambers. It was exactly six months after their arrival in Auschwitz. As the inspection by the Red Cross never materialized, the Familienlager lost its usefulness and was liquidated at the beginning of July 1944. Able-bodied men and women (if one can use such a term to describe emaciated prisoners) were selected for shipment to other labour camps and the rest were to be gassed. Then, unexpectedly, on July 6, 1944, boys between the ages of fourteen and sixteen were ordered to appear before Joseph Mengele for a "selection". He picked 89 boys who were promptly marched to a neighboring "men's camp" (B.II.d., Maennerlager). During the following days, all those left behind in the family camp were sent to the gas chambers.

Of the 89 boys that fate saved from certain death, 39 are alive today; they are the subject of a recently privately published book entitled "After those fifty years, Memoirs of the Birkenau Boys". It is a compilation of Biographies and recollections of those who survived the subsequent ten months; a most difficult time between the fateful Mengele "selection" and the end of the war. Some of the boys were sent from the Maennerlager to other camps. In January 1945, as the Russians advanced from the east, all of Auschwitz was liquidated and those prisoners capable of working

were evacuated to other camps further to the west. Thousands perished while marching in freezing weather to distant railway stations. A small cluster of the boys reached Loslau, where they were loaded on open railway cars and sent to Mauthausen. It is not known how many perished during this trip in bitter cold, without food or water, nor is it known who died in the next three months while the group was in Mauthausen, Melk and Gunskirchen.

From Mauthausen the boys went by train to a camp in the town of Melk, where many of them were assigned to peeling rotten potatoes. As the Russian front advanced the camp was liquidated and the remaining inmates shipped by train back to Mauthausen. Because the main camp was so overcrowded, prisoners were placed in a nearby "tent camp" where conditions were even worse than in the main camp. On April 28, 1945, the boys were included with a group of prisoners that was forced to march from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen, a distance of at least 56 kilometers. It took several days to reach a small camp in a forest near Gunskirchen. Most of the boys were close to death, as the American army neared Gunskirchen and the Germans guarding the camp fled. The boys staggered out of the camp on the 5th of May 1945.

They would not have survived another week; most were seriously ill and were taken to a hospital in nearby Hoersching, a former Luftwaffe base, under the control of United States army medical personnel. After their recovery, the boys set out for their former homes. Several traveled by boat on the Danube back to Melk, where they crossed into the Russian occupation zone. From Melk they were transported to Wiener Neustadt by train and then continued on foot to Bratislava, which they reached on June 26, 1945.

Of those boys who were in the Gunskirchen concentration camp, fifteen are known to be alive today.

Michael J. Kraus, 1998