

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek: Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über dnb.dnb.de abrufbar.

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„BoD · Books on Demand GmbH, Überseering 33,
22297 Hamburg, bod@bod.de

Druck: Libri Plureos GmbH, Friedensallee 273, 22763 Hamburg“

ISBN: 9783819205965

COMMAND RESPONSIBILITY

different perspective

Facts by a Jewish Camp Official, by
HERMANN WENKART



**The inner need to write and free myself from the
burden of experience by putting it on paper.**

Dunja Rosen, the Jewish writer,
on why she was compelled to write.



Hermann Wenkart

FOREWORD TO THE 2024 EDITION

This is the story of my family, more specifically the story of my mother Ruth's early childhood, whose fate in Deblin plays a key role in this book. After the war, my mother came to Vienna with Hermann Wenkart, whom I unfortunately only briefly knew as my grandfather, and his wife Klara, my grandmother. She was raised by the Wenkarts in Vienna, who remained in Austria after the war. Hermann Wenkart passed away in 1974.

In 1959, Ruth met my father, Raphael Marcovici, in Vienna. My father, himself a Holocaust survivor, was deported to Auschwitz from Transylvania, Romania, in 1944, along with his sister Blanca. Blanca was murdered in Auschwitz at the end of 1944. In January 1945, my father was transferred to Dora-Mittelbau, where he was liberated by American troops on April 11, 1945. The rest of my father's family—his parents, two other sisters, and three brothers—fled to Canada and Israel.

My parents stayed in Vienna and built a supermarket chain together, which they ran until my father passed away in 1982. My sister Annette was born in 1963 and tragically died at the young age of 29. I was born in 1969, work in mechanical engineering, and also live in Vienna.



Ruth Wenkart (later Marcovici),
Vienna 1957

It took my mother many years after the war to reconnect with relatives, as there was no contact with extended family. Eventually, in 1995, she succeeded in locating her half-brother Paul in Paris, where her biological father had fled during the war. Sadly, Paul had already passed away five years earlier.

From her immediate family, only her aunt Clara, who later adopted her, and her father survived the Holocaust. Her grandfather Emanuel, her sister Hedwig and her young daughter, as well as her mother Anna, were all murdered.

My mother, Ruth Marcovici, passed away on August 2, 2024, in Vienna. She spent her final years at the Jewish retirement home Maimonides in Vienna.

In May 2013, I decided to republish my grandfather's 1963 book and, in October 2024, to release an expanded edition with added visual material. In 2013, it had become difficult to find copies of the original book, which my mother had often lent to friends to read. Now, in 2024, interest in testimonials from that time remains relevant. I wish to make the book and its message of reconciliation and the story of one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" accessible to a wider audience.

The story my grandfather tells in this book is one of hope, where, amid the greatest catastrophe faced by the Jews, a miracle or a unique coincidence occurred in a camp in Deblin. An Austrian officer risked his life to save 400 Viennese Jews. This story parallels the survival of my uncles and aunts in Romania, who were saved by Christians from the village of Budest and hidden in the forest for years. These two stories have deeply influenced me, and I hope that sharing this book will inspire others with this positive message of humanity.

Michael Marcovici, Vienna, 2024

BACK COVER TEXT OF THE 1963 EDITION

This factual report recounts personally experienced situations, concisely presenting the history of the first deportation transport from Vienna to Opole in the General Government in January 1940, marking the beginning of the resettlement of Vienna's Jewish community into the Final Solution.

Apart from the many existing narratives of the bloody history from the East during the time of the Thousand-Year Reich, this documentation seeks to honor those individuals who had enough courage to remain humane in the inferno of a world full of brutality! Unbelievable experiences from a time of seemingly unimaginable persecution of people, simply because they did not conform to the ruling regime, are meant to prove that the frequently misused term "command necessity" was conveniently employed as an excuse to diminish guilt during war crimes trials.

Anyone who truly felt and thought humanely could, without particular danger to themselves, redirect commands they received—commands recognized as criminal in their consequences—so that they became ineffective or their impact was mitigated for those affected.

Anyone familiar with the conditions in the extermination zones will be astonished that, in this sea of murderous intent, violence, and brutality, a semi-humane oasis could exist for years, solely because cer-

tain individuals, guided by their conscience, acted differently than the criminal regime had intended. Unfortunately, these individuals were very few; had there been more, many millions of innocent victims might not have perished.

The author has chosen only particularly striking episodes that, in their vividness, will keep readers captivated from start to finish, bringing the past to life. Especially for inquisitive young people who approach the past—an era they did not experience themselves—with curiosity, this historical account can answer many questions their fathers might prefer to hide, often out of guilt.

Hermann Wenkart, Vienna, 1963

Foreword

The topic addressed in this factual report has been presented to the public so frequently since the collapse of the Third Reich that it might no longer arouse interest.

Nonetheless, I decided to write it because of the defense strategy employed in many Nazi war crimes trials, revolving around the concept of “command necessity.” This term was intended to justify irresponsible acts filled with the most atrocious inhumanity, heinous crimes, and incomprehensible ruthlessness devoid of any humanity, to spare the accused from conviction or diminish their guilt.

I followed and even attended some of these trials, astonished by the confidence, even the nonchalance, displayed by those accused. One might have expected at least a shred of guilt or some acknowledgment of their overwhelming culpability to affect their demeanor. Yet, the accused readily hid behind this artificially inflated concept, using it to numb their conscience and downplay their involvement in these crimes.

This report aims to prove that a bit of personal courage, some civil bravery, and the will to act could suffice to avoid mindless obedience and complicity in crimes for which one might later be held accountable. Through clever adaptation and apparent compliance, much could be prevented or at least mitigated for those affected, without facing the risks of defying orders or committing sabotage.

Countless reports detail the overly eager execution of orders, exceeding quotas, and particularly the incomprehensible negative behavior of individuals in key command positions. These accounts starkly contrast with my report, which includes people who, despite immense challenges, managed to uphold humanity and treat Jews humanely. These individuals were not limited to opponents of the regime; even a covert party member with a membership number in the 100,000s risked their life to hide over 100 Jews from deportation, treated them humanely, and eased the burden of forced labor under their command. Civilian officials in the Luftwaffe's construction office and officers and soldiers at the Deblin airbase, who might be most eligible for a claim of "command necessity," had the courage not to become accomplices to sadistic criminals.

Just as I reject the collective guilt of Jews exploited by the Nazis, I must also, as a result of my experiences, reject collective accusations in general—whether they were directed at Germans in the past, or Russians and Warsaw Pact nations today. It is always the leaders of a dictatorship and their willing accomplices who spread such misery and commit crimes against humanity. This is why I have written these lines, and if I am criticized for coming forward so late, I can only justify myself by saying that I waited to gain the necessary distance and to report with full human objectivity. It is never too late to tell the truth, especially when taking a just stance.

On a personal note, as is evident in this report, if the term "command necessity" were ever valid, it could rightfully apply to me without arrogance. I am grateful that, thanks to many fortunate coincidences—and not least my own initiative—I was able to act in ways that proved helpful to those affected.

There is much talk of finally coming to terms with the past, of creating an atmosphere of forgiveness by downplaying the unimaginable degradation of human behavior. But this can only happen if a complete reckoning is made. The truly guilty, many of whom have unfortunately evaded justice, must be swiftly brought before impartial courts. In my view, many trials were initiated too late due to the sluggishness of the justice system, giving skilled defense lawyers opportunities to

undermine witness testimonies. The passage of time created gaps in memory, casting the actions of the accused in a softened, conciliatory light.

Only a clear distancing from the monstrous atrocities of the Thousand-Year Reich led by Himmler and his ilk will demonstrate to future German generations that they have overcome the inhumanity of the 12-year Nazi regime. This could also help stifle the resurgence of those clinging to outdated ideologies.

The insistence on “command necessity” by the accused undoubtedly reflects a desire for justification but also serves to diminish the brutality of a time marked by the cruelest oppression of undesirables.

If judges, perhaps still tied to the past or sympathetic to it, yield to this concept, the next generation—already poorly informed by their parents or educators—will gain a distorted view of this shameful era.

To the victims, it is incomprehensible that these atrocities, carried out under state orders, were committed by individuals whose intelligence, education, and otherwise moral character should have enabled them to assess the criminality of these acts but who were still willing to perpetrate them. This moral failure is beyond understanding or justification.

Equally astounding is the apathy of society, which passively allowed the crimes to occur, and the indifference that enabled a false sense of responsibility, paving the way for an improper evaluation of true guilt. This is partly why those clinging to old ideologies believe they can again hold positions of influence in public and government. I have often had the opportunity to discuss the Nazi era with inquisitive young people. In these discussions, they could not understand why so few people were willing to help those being persecuted. Failing to provide assistance during life-threatening situations is a punishable offense, especially for educated individuals. How many failed to offer such help, and how many contributed instead to the violence?

Time may heal many wounds, but the scale of the crimes, the vast number of murdered individuals, and the enormous suffering of that time carry an obligation to ensure true criminals face justice and opportunistic accomplices are warned. For this reason, the excuse of “command necessity” must not be accepted.

Many incidents described in this report may seem implausible to those familiar with the conditions in occupied Poland. In this sea of violence, blood, and atrocities, it seemed impossible for an island of humanity to exist—where those who felt compassion and risked their own lives managed to create a semblance of survivable conditions. This was especially unique during the war’s final years and should not be withheld from the public.

Giving due recognition to these individuals, who distinguished themselves so positively from the majority complicit in the regime’s violence, is the purpose of these lines. They are not written with the virtuosity of a professional author but as a report of lived and deeply felt experiences.

If this contribution can provide inquisitive youth with an unvarnished view of a fragment of the Third Reich’s history and put the concept of “command necessity” into proper perspective, then it is worth having endured and witnessed these events.

Author

Prologue

Until April 1934, I lived in Munich but was forced to leave for Strasbourg early on the morning of April 20, driven out by the SA. As a member of the Socialist Party, I was unable to return to Vienna, my hometown, as the political situation there made it inadvisable.

My stay in France lasted only until the end of 1934. I faced difficulties obtaining a work permit, and working illegally carried risks I was unwilling to take. Therefore, I sought to reach Czechoslovakia by avoiding German-controlled territory, as it was considered a model host country for socialist emigrants.

Even the journey, with all its challenges, would be worth recounting in detail. With very little travel money and struggling with language barriers, I traveled through Moravia. Human kindness and cruelty lay so close together that one could never be sure whether they faced a friend or an enemy. Uncertainty bred hesitation and distrust.

After nearly three months of wandering, I finally found work and shelter in February 1935 in Brno, the capital of Moravia. I lived there for over two years, modestly but relatively free of worry, despite my limited language skills.

The continued pressure of the National Socialists on Austria eventually loosened the persecution of socialists there. Hoping for better eco-

nomic prospects, I moved to Vienna in January 1937. At the time, the two-state theory was widely believed, and who could have predicted the extent of Hitler's ambitions?

The year 1937 passed quickly. I met and fell in love with my wife, marrying her on February 6, 1938. During our honeymoon, we were startled by news of Schuschnigg's visit to Obersalzberg. The communiqué from this meeting made me sense what was to come, and I began planning another emigration.

However, the looming difficulties proved insurmountable. I faced the events that followed without the slightest resistance.

The German invasion of Austria on March 10, 1938, my arrest on March 22, 1938, and my deportation to the labor camp in Kaprun on November 10, 1938 ("Kristallnacht"), culminating in the first transport of Jews from Vienna to Poland on January 10, 1940—these are dates well-documented in literature and the press and need not be elaborated here. My personal experiences, however, are, to my knowledge, unknown to the public, and I wish to begin by recounting the story of the first transport of Viennese Jews to Opole, in Lublin County.

Deportation

In the first week of January 1940, an order from the “Emigration Office” on Argentinierstraße arrived at our home. We were to report to the relocation camp at Sperlschule by January 12, bringing no more than 20 kilograms of luggage, including two blankets. Furthermore, we were instructed to lock our apartments and bring the keys with us.

We knew from the press about Hitler’s order to make Vienna “Jew-free” as soon as possible. Rumors spread rapidly, claiming that Jews were now being gathered into designated ghettos. The daily harassment—both small and large—the hostility of much of the population, incited by vicious propaganda, and the open display of their disdain were all part of a calculated effort to make this “relocation” seem more acceptable to us. But who among us had the imagination to foresee what was truly coming? We knew of the horrific conditions in the concentration camps, of the sadistic torment inflicted by individual guards, and even of the cruelty of mobs during so-called “people’s uprisings,” which we had experienced firsthand.

Yet, we knew nothing of the perfectly orchestrated machinery of murder—of gas chambers, of mass executions! Who could have believed that the nation of poets and thinkers, the great German cultural nation, was capable of such things? During World War I, reports of German atrocities spread through the world press, but most Central Europeans dismissed them as mere propaganda. We ignored every

warning from well-meaning neutrals, even from emigrants who had found refuge abroad, simply because we could not believe such things were possible. Even when faced with undeniable evidence, we downplayed events as wartime excesses. After all, we considered ourselves German citizens, not enemy aliens. We spoke the same language, had the same education, and saw ourselves as part of the same culture.

Despite the discrimination we faced because of our ancestry, we were a peaceful group who wanted nothing more than to be left alone. That is why we offered no resistance. The accusations from younger generations of Israeli Jews, who ask why we did not fight back, are misplaced. Most of the youth who might have resisted had already emigrated.

There were no signs of resistance among us, nothing that would have required harsh suppression. Yet, the authorities acted as though they feared us. We could not understand any of it.

I leave it to historians to explain the extent to which internal political difficulties or other factors led to these events. We, the victims, followed orders almost without protest, shaken by the indifference of other nations. Nowhere was there any willingness to accept the unfortunate refugees; everywhere, bureaucratic hurdles and insurmountable obstacles blocked the way. Humanity seemed to have vanished. Only those with financial means had any chance of emigrating. Large and small countries alike failed us. If one compares this with how Austria—still under Four-Power occupation—opened its borders after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, without asking whether the refugees had money or possessions, the contrast is staggering. A wave of global solidarity and aid followed in that case.

But from 1938 to 1945, there was a collapse of humanity on an unimaginable scale. That is the true reason we, leaderless and desperate, walked toward our doom. We felt betrayed and abandoned by the entire world.

At the school on Große Sperlgasse (the counterpart to the school on Castellezgasse), those who had been summoned gathered—mostly

elderly couples carrying only their most essential belongings, as only 20 kilograms of luggage was permitted. However, very few adhered to this limit. How could they? A bit of bedding and clothing, some cooking utensils, cherished personal items, and the required two blankets—20 kilograms were simply not enough. Their luggage resembled that of Russian Jewish petty bourgeoisie fleeing pogroms in earlier times. It was a sorrowful sight.

The school was under the control of the infamous SS Untersturmführer Brunner II. He was assisted by a Jewish orderly service, tasked with rounding up those who were late and assigning arrivals to empty classrooms. For more than three days, we had to endure the barren rooms as best we could. We slept on the floor, using one blanket as a mattress, our backpacks as pillows, and the second blanket for warmth. A kind of stew was distributed from a communal kitchen for lunch and dinner, along with bread from a school storeroom.

The heartbreak and despair that unfolded during those days are beyond description. I can only offer glimpses to help convey the reality. Elderly, frail couples leaned on one another for support. Individuals arrived alone. Families with children—mostly adults over fifty—gathered in silence. Young people were few. Fear was etched into every face. Everyone looked like hunted prey. Every conversation revolved around personal tragedies—each story a novel of human suffering. It was overwhelming to witness so much misery, fear, and helplessness crammed into such a confined space. The air was thick with sorrow, a crushing sense of despair that stripped away all will to resist.

As many as forty people were packed into a single classroom. Living in such close quarters, with people of different backgrounds and temperaments, bred hysteria. Petty matters that would have been ignored in normal times erupted into heated arguments, leading to hostility and incomprehensible hatred—even though we were all fellow sufferers, bound by the same fate.

For me, these events had an unexpected effect. Always trying to mediate in disputes, I found myself shaken out of my own despair and apathy. It was as if I had been given a stimulant, jolting me into action.

I forgot my own fate and began helping others. Wherever there was need, I stepped in. I assisted the elderly in setting up their sleeping areas, tidied during the day, made room for new arrivals, comforted the desperate, and handed out medicine to the sick. My efforts were noticed, and I was soon approached by Commander Brunner with a question that troubled me deeply—whether I wanted to stay behind until all deportations from Vienna were completed. Given my attachment to the city and the uncertainty of what lay ahead, it was a tempting offer. But witnessing the daily horrors of our situation, I rejected it. I longed for the “relocation” to its supposed destination—a place in occupied Poland that promised work and rest.

On the evening of January 15, 1941, we were called up one by one. Beforehand, we were ordered to surrender all valuables, especially money. Hiding anything, we were warned, would have “terrible consequences,” even the death penalty. We had to sign a document—one we were not even allowed to read. A brief, discreet glance revealed that we were signing over all our possessions, including our abandoned homes, to the German Reich. It was outright theft. Money and jewelry were tossed into a drawer without receipts, and we were each given twenty Polish zlotys as “travel money.”

This moment shattered us. We stared at each other in silent shock, unable to speak.

At four in the morning, we were herded into waiting trucks and driven to the Aspang Railway Station. There, we joined another group from the Castellezgasse school and were loaded into old, decommissioned passenger train cars. The Jewish Community provided us with food parcels, and then the train departed. Almost everyone wept. Yet, in our compartment, an air of forced optimism took hold. My wife and I were traveling with the Birnbach family—he was a pharmacist from Praterstraße, with two daughters aged fifteen and sixteen. Slowly, the mood shifted toward hopeful denial. I even exclaimed as we passed the Ferris wheel: “We’ll see each other again, even if it takes a while!”

The journey was slow, with few stops, moving at the pace of a freight train.

At Oderberg, during a longer stop, I went to fetch water. Upon my return, the Birnbach daughters greeted me with laughter. A policeman nearby muttered: "You'll lose that laughter soon enough!" Did he already know our fate?

After more than forty hours, we arrived late at night in Nałęczów, where we were to transfer to another train bound for Opole. As we disembarked, German police and local collaborators beat us with whips. The sick and elderly, burdened by their luggage, fled from the blows in terror.

Even in the bitter cold, we were grateful to survive the journey. But this was only the beginning.

Opole

As we disembarked from the freight cars in Opole, we were once again met with shouting, cursing, and scolding from the gendarmes standing on the platform. Whips cracked, though less on the bodies of those getting out and more in the air, meant to hasten our exit from the station.

On the platform stood Jewish residents of Opole, who offered their help, especially assisting the elderly and those with mobility issues. They also showed us the way to the small town of Opole, about two kilometers from the station. The entire transport—consisting of approximately 1,030 men, women, and children—marched at midnight, carrying our luggage and what remained of the provisions we had received in Vienna. We were accompanied by young local Jews to a prepared overnight shelter, which was the town's synagogue, cleared for this purpose. Though it was January, the winter in Opole was unusually mild, with temperatures just above freezing, so at least we were not cold.

Upon entering the synagogue, we found ourselves in a state of complete chaos. Everyone stood bewildered, unable to grasp the new reality. The initial intimidation of being greeted with dog whips contrasted sharply with the heartfelt welcome from the local Jews, yet the sight of our primitive lodgings was disheartening. It was a terrible dissonance—the vast prayer hall, now a desecrated sanctuary, stripped bare, with straw covering the floor. This was to serve as our living and



Ruth and Rafael Marcovici in Paris,
1952

sleeping space for who knows how long. Scattered luggage, the suffocating crowd, frightened elderly people, crying children, a jumble of voices—an almost unfathomable confusion.

Yet, instinctively, the local Jews' compassion was awakened. A wave of sympathy and willingness to help flooded us. Each local took in people as guests in their homes without expecting any compensation. This was no easy decision, as the Jewish community of Opole—about 3,500 people—had already been dispossessed of their homes by order of the district governor, none other than the infamous Viennese bookseller Amon Göth. They had been forced into a fenced-off ghetto, cut off from the Polish population. Despite their own suffering, they showed an incredible willingness to help complete strangers, even though we did not speak their language. This act of kindness deserves to be remembered by future generations.

A kind young couple approached my wife and invited her to come with them. Despite their warm words, we hesitated at first, especially because my wife was so exhausted from the events that she only wanted to lie down and rest. It took a firm and encouraging speech from the young man before we picked up our belongings again and followed them, feeling lost and worried—what would the future bring?

After about ten minutes of walking, we arrived at a house that looked quite plain from the outside but was spotlessly clean inside. It consisted of a kitchen, a small hallway, a living room, and two bedrooms. This was the home of the pharmacist Geszychter, who lived there with his wife, two daughters, and their husbands.

I will always remember the warm welcome we received, which will remain in my memory for the rest of my life. The heads of the household greeted us as if we were long-lost siblings visiting from afar. They welcomed us with heartfelt warmth, soothing words of sympathy, and a generous meal. They served us food we had long been deprived of—it was like a fairy tale. Soon, our initial shyness faded, and despite the late hour, we began sharing our stories with our eager hosts. We spoke about our experiences, believing them to be the worst possible hardships, but when we heard the stories from Opole, we realized

the extent of suffering endured under Nazi rule. Fear crept in—what would the future hold for us? Everything was uncertain. A mountain of questions, the weight of worries, and unspoken fears cast a shadow over what would have otherwise been pleasant hours.

Eventually, exhaustion took over. My wife and I lay down on make-shift beds in a small room. At first, we fell into a deep sleep, but soon we tossed and turned, haunted by heavy dreams, until we awoke late in the morning.

I still vividly remember the figure of old Mr. Geszychter—tall, intelligent, with sharp eyes hidden behind modern glasses, always twinkling mischievously at visitors. He had an imposing presence, always ready with a joke, always wearing an ironic smile, downplaying unpleasant events and embracing life with optimism. His kind and understanding nature earned my deepest admiration. I deeply regret that fate never allowed me to meet him again after those difficult times. However, in my heart, I have built a monument to this wonderful man, which I will always look up to.

His wife, a doctor, was a perfect counterpart to him. Despite her somewhat heavyset figure, she had an innate charm. Her friendly, always playfully twinkling eyes and dimples made her an endearing sight. The way she offered food and encouraged guests to eat was so delightful that one simply could not refuse. Everything she did came from a place of genuine warmth and human kindness. She came from a wealthy family of jewelers in Tsarist Russia—the Szlezzynger family from St. Petersburg. Her entire demeanor, every gesture, spoke of her refined upbringing. Her empathy and understanding revealed her medical background. Like her husband, I hold her in the highest regard and gratitude.

Throughout my life, I have experienced much ingratitude, even from people to whom I had given much—even their lives. I endured cruelty and suffered under the selfishness of others, almost to the point of losing faith in humanity. But the memory of the wonderful Geszychter couple kept my belief in the goodness of people alive.

Their well-mannered daughters and their husbands stood out pleasantly among the Jewish residents of Opole. Always polite and helpful, they did everything they could to assist us. Communication was possible because I spoke some Yiddish, though the common language in Congress Poland was Polish and Russian.

To illustrate the depth of hospitality we received, I must mention one episode. The Geszychter family was highly secular, considering Jewish religious laws outdated and irrelevant. The commandments of Moses, in the eyes of Poland's Jewish intelligentsia, were seen as an unnecessary burden, merely an excuse for the cruel persecution they faced.

Yet, knowing that I adhered to a more traditional faith, they made an exception. Though they had never held a Passover Seder before, they followed my instructions to prepare a fully ritual Seder for both nights, and I was asked to lead it. This might sound simple, but considering the preparations involved, it was extraordinary. For the first time, they koshered their dishes, acquired kosher meat (previously unknown in their household), and procured matzah and kosher wine. All this effort—for an unwilling guest, forcibly sent by the Nazis into an unfamiliar environment.

The atmosphere of those two evenings is difficult to describe. Everyone listened intently as I recited the Haggadah, observing the rituals with deep reverence. It was touching to see young and old alike absorbing the story of the Exodus as if it were a revelation.

It felt like a reflection of our own reality—as if the oppressed and persecuted Jews under the Nazi yoke were once again hoping for a leader to guide them from suffering and disgrace into freedom.



Ruth Marcovici, Vienna, ca. 1974

Deblin

At first, we were accommodated in an abandoned house—on corridors, in the attic, and on the stairwell. The Judenrat in Irena, a nearby suburb, was notified. In the late afternoon, we received our first meal of this dreadful day: bread, jam, and tea. The floor was our only bedding.

We were grateful that outside, it was a wonderful spring day with warm sunshine—a stark contrast to our state of mind. We looked ahead to the next morning with anxiety. It was not hard to imagine the fear of those who had been left behind. I believe that none of us slept that night—not just because of the discomfort.

After the difficult night, we had a roll call in the morning. We were taken outside the airbase to a newly built, spacious wooden barrack. Inside, we found wooden bunks with thickly stuffed straw mattresses and two wool blankets each. This was to be our new lodging. After everyone had chosen a sleeping spot, we were led to the airbase for work.

Our guards were soldiers—evidently, frontline-ineligible troops—who reassured us and eased our initial terror. We were assigned to road construction and the building of embankments to shield aircraft from enemy air attacks since there were too few hangars at the airfield. The runway had been significantly expanded to accommodate numerous combat aircraft.

A fortunate coincidence occurred after just over eight days, shaping my fate, as well as that of my family and nearly 900 Jews, until our deportation on July 23, 1944. When I reflect on this moment now, nearly 26 years later, I must humbly acknowledge the workings of a higher power.

I was working at a concrete mixer. As I looked up from my task—being accustomed to staying alert from my previous work at the Tauern Power Plant—I noticed an officer observing us. Judging by his sleeve insignia, he was a Luftwaffe captain. At first, I couldn't believe my eyes and thought my imagination was deceiving me. But the more I looked, the more certain I became.

It was a war comrade from the Austrian Infantry Regiment No. 24, whom I had carried on my back, severely wounded, through enemy fire from a hilltop on the Doberdò plateau to the medical post in August 1918. Normally, I was never plagued by feelings of inferiority, but at that moment, I hesitated to reveal myself. I had no idea how he would react. We had already endured bitter experiences.

Nevertheless, I decided to step forward despite my dirt-covered clothing and disheveled appearance.

At first, he was indignant at the audacity of a Jew, marked by a white armband called a "Lente," addressing him. But as soon as I mentioned my name, my regiment, and the incident at Doberdò in a concise and military manner, he became approachable.

To the astonishment of my fellow workers and the guards, he embraced me and asked how I had ended up there. After I gave him a brief explanation, he went to the commanding officer and ordered that I be cleaned up and prepared for collection by a patrol the next morning.

As soon as he left, my comrades bombarded me with questions, wanting to know what had happened. I could only recount the past events, but I had no idea what lay ahead. That night, I was once again unable to sleep, my thoughts racing. I imagined the most unlikely possibili-

ties—including returning with my family to Vienna. The initial belief that relocation to Poland meant a reprieve for us had turned out to be a terrible illusion. I feared the worst, but no one could have foreseen the horrors that would actually unfold.

The next morning at five o'clock, I was exceptionally allowed to leave the barracks for proper cleaning. At the well, I scrubbed myself thoroughly. Using the meager supplies available, I cleaned my shoes and clothes as best as I could, so that I looked somewhat presentable.

At 8:30 AM, a military policeman from the airbase escorted me to the airfield commandant's office. I had to wait in the antechamber of Lieutenant Colonel Hönig, constantly scrutinized by passing officers and soldiers.

At exactly 9 AM, my former war comrade, Captain Eduard Bromofsky, entered the room. After some brief instructions, during which he addressed me informally, I was led into the inner office.

After a military-style report, I was introduced with the following words:

"Colonel, this is the war comrade I told you about, the one who saved my life. I would be very grateful if you could somehow help him, even though he has the misfortune of being a Jew."

The lieutenant colonel scrutinized me for a long time. My upright posture and brief, precise answers seemed to make an impression. He picked up the phone and contacted the chief quartermaster, Wolfram, who was in charge of the Jewish labor camp.

The colonel informed him that he was assigning him an "exceptional Jew" and would discuss the details in person. I was instructed to report to Wolfram immediately, who would handle everything else. As I was dismissed, he reassured me:

"You don't need to be afraid. In the Wehrmacht, especially among the airmen, you are in good hands."

After expressing my gratitude, I left the office and waited outside for the captain to tell me what would happen next.

A few minutes later, Bromofsky returned and said:

“Hermann, you are really lucky! The lieutenant colonel took a liking to you and ordered the quartermaster to take care of you and make your situation easier. I also discussed your future with him. He explicitly told me: If Jews have any chance of survival in Poland, it is only in a labor camp—especially one run by the Wehrmacht. All existing ghettos are temporary; only those fit for work have a chance to survive. Everything else is doomed to destruction. If you want your wife and family to live, get them out of Opole and bring them here. I will help you as much as I can.”

I thanked him warmly and went to Wolfram’s office to learn more.

When I reflect on these events, it is clear that by 1940, higher command knew exactly what terrible fate awaited both deported and native Jews. That is why I always doubt when older people claim that only a few knew about the horrors, violence, and atrocities, because a “wall of silence” surrounded everything.

It is impossible for me to believe that so many accomplices remained silent. It seems more likely that it was a case of willful ignorance—a refusal to know, to silence a guilty conscience. That, I think, best characterizes this era. Millions of soldiers, civilians—including many opponents of the regime—and hundreds of thousands of forced laborers from occupied territories all supposedly remained silent or encountered disbelief? No rational person can accept that.

Even today, people have a tendency to trivialize things.

Through the quartermaster’s intervention, I was assigned to the Luftwaffe’s construction department under Engineer Figura. He appointed me as the group leader of about 100 Jews working in road construction for the Viennese company Autheried.

I was responsible for payroll, food rations, and even procuring essential medicines. This work gave me great satisfaction, as I was able to help those who were suffering in ways I had never imagined possible.

My position at Autheried not only benefited me—it later allowed me, with the support of the airbase commandant, to bring my wife from Opole to me.

Anyone who knew the conditions in occupied Poland can understand what a lifeline this was.

I carried the child in my arms, expecting that a patrol might stop me or even shoot at me without warning. All of this was within the realm of possibility, and yet I walked without fear because I felt deep inside that everything had to turn out well. Not just this time, but in all other precarious situations, I had this good, optimistic feeling. I don't know what to attribute this to; in any case, I believed I was safe and would survive all danger unscathed.

The joy of my relatives was unimaginable when I arrived with Ruthi. They had been very worried about us, fearing the worst, and now they saw us safe and healthy. It was one of the happiest days of that terrible time.

I still remember the first deportation very well. It was in April 1941. First, the town of Ryki, about six kilometers away, was targeted. As I had probably already mentioned, I sat safely in the construction barrack of the "Auteried" and watched from the office window as the unfortunate people marched past. They were driven by the green police and the SS. The old and the young, struggling under the weight of their bundles, which likely contained only hastily gathered belongings—clothes, linens, or similar necessities. It was an unimaginable scene of horror: masses of people gasping under their burdens, whips cracking on those who stumbled, hesitated, or fell. Cracking gunshots, and at the end of the procession, Panjewagen (horse-drawn carts) full of corpses, bore witness to the terrible fate of those who had collapsed from exhaustion. For the first time, I saw the true face of the Nazi terror regime. For the first time, I witnessed such unspeakable

brutality, the kind I could never have imagined. I would witness many more cruelties later, but that march of horror surpassed everything my mind could comprehend.

I had heard of atrocities—but to see organized mass murder, not even cloaked in a political pretense, with my own eyes was something else entirely. I am grateful that it was also the only time I saw it firsthand.

At this point, I feel compelled to address those who argue that enough has been written about these events, that we should finally put this unpleasant past behind us. I must insist that they are gravely mistaken. Only constant remembrance can prevent the regrettably large number of indifferent people from being drawn into the wake of those who still seek to justify that murderous regime. Those who did not experience it, who only know of these horrors secondhand, will struggle to understand that such things could have happened. No human imagination can fully grasp the reality of those events. The ingenuity of the sadists of the “Third Reich” was so vast that it surpassed even the most vivid imagination. The slogan “Never forget!” must be reinforced by continuous reminders so that it becomes “Never again!”

The crimes committed were so outrageous that no perpetrator should ever be granted a statute of limitations or clemency. Any attempt to whitewash or forget serves only to make this shameful chapter of German history socially acceptable again—as we can see on the current political stage. I am the staunchest opponent of collective guilt for an entire people, but for the crimes of the rulers of that so-called “Thousand-Year Reich,” there can be no pardon. In the name of the millions of tortured people across Europe and those displaced by the consequences of the lost war, I appeal to responsible politicians: avoid any form of assistance or connection, no matter how opportune, with those who still pull the strings of a resurgent movement that has already brought so much suffering to humanity. This general detour from my personal experiences seems necessary to me because it provides context for the following lines.

Some time before the German invasion of Russia, the construction barracks on the Vistula River were completed, surrounded by a wire

fence, and occupied by Jewish and Polish forced laborers. The diagram on the following page illustrates the situation. I became the administrative clerk of the camp, which was under the supervision of a Luftwaffe non-commissioned officer. To assist me in the office, we brought in fellow Viennese Jews due to their proficiency in German. For medical care, we brought Dr. Wasservogel from Vienna and the dentist Zissu from Opole as a medic and for dental care.

The area where the camp was located was part of the Vistula floodplain, making it damp and swampy. Fifty meters away stood the Luftwaffe construction office, making it easy to reach our supposed protectors. Diagonally across from us was the air force fuel depot.

The first camp leader was Sergeant Kattengel from Magdeburg, who held office until March 1943. His small rank did not stop him from acting like a grand mogul. The authority over several hundred Jews intoxicated him with power. It required a great deal of diplomacy, combined with leveraging my good relations with the construction management and the commandant's office, to keep him somewhat in check. I can still see him before me, accompanied by a massive black wolfhound, a dog whip in his hand, strutting through the camp like a petty tyrant.

We received our wages from the Luftwaffe construction office and were provided with rations calculated at 1,700 calories. We had our own camp administration and even ten Jewish camp policemen. We formed a self-contained community, while the Luftwaffe only provided our guards and otherwise left us to our own devices.

We collected our food rations weekly, and when we noticed that Kattengel was siphoning off supplies for himself, I managed—through tact and intervention with the construction office—to ensure that the food was stored in our own camp warehouse. Kattengel was left only with the responsibility of managing food supplies for the Poles.

Shortly before the war against Russia, typhus broke out in the camp, probably brought in by Warsaw Jews who had recently arrived. The camp was placed under quarantine. Only Dr. Wasservogel and I, since



**Oberrabbiner Paul Chaim Eisenberg,
Ruth Marcovici**
ca. 1983

I lived in town, were allowed to come and go, maintaining our connection to the outside world. We had been vaccinated against typhus in time and were very careful. Nevertheless, Dr. Wasservogel became infected and died in a Lublin hospital. We mourned his death deeply, and soon after, the dentist Zissu also passed away from a heart attack. For some time, we were left without a doctor in the camp until, in October 1942, after the last deportation from Irena, Dr. Kestenbaum from Ryki, Dr. Rosenbluth from Tarnów, and the medic Frym joined us. Additionally, veterinarian Dr. Fries arrived at the camp. We established a medical station and a kind of infirmary, always stocked with enough medications, which we received partly from the Jewish Aid Office in Kraków, partly from the commandant's office from Wehrmacht supplies, and also from purchases at the pharmacy in Irena.

Given what I learned after the war, I can say with pride that our camp was perhaps the only one for Jews that remained so well-equipped until our evacuation to Częstochowa on June 23, 1944. Even after the SS took over the camp in late 1943, we managed to supplement the reduced rations with vegetables from Naleczów and our own garden, so that when our inmates arrived in Częstochowa, they were stared at like miraculous beings from another world.

Without boasting, I can claim much of what was achieved was due to my ever-watchful mind, my initiative in seizing every opportunity, and my unyielding activity in every situation. That such conditions existed in the years of chaos, the looming military defeat, and the blind, raging fury of the SS seems unbelievable, but it is the truth.

At that time, influential members of the Jewish Council wanted to appoint me as its president due to my German language skills and good relationships with the Germans. Although this position came with advantages, I declined because collaboration with the green police, the SS, and German administration seemed too dubious. Somehow, I still had more trust in the Wehrmacht.

The outbreak of war with Russia also led to a tighter organization of the camp. Soldiers were stationed outside as guards, while inside, control numbers were issued, and the camp population was meticulously

checked on a weekly basis. When I received word from the commandant's office that Irena was to be completely evacuated in the autumn of 1942, I dissolved my household in the ghetto and brought my entire family into the camp. This presented me with a problem that caused me much anxiety. According to camp regulations, only those fit for work—meaning no children—could be admitted. Fortunately, female labor was employed at Horst, in agriculture, and in the company. The large kitchen and the tailoring workshop also employed women. This gave me enough opportunities to place female family members, but there was no chance for children, especially toddlers like Ruthi, to be admitted.

With this concern, I turned once again to Wolfram, who had already proven to be a guardian angel once before. Unfortunately, Captain Bromofsky had since been transferred to the front, and despite diligent inquiries, I had heard nothing more of him. But a miracle happened. Wolfram contacted Lieutenant Colonel Hönig, a very humane officer. He explained that keeping families together would be beneficial for morale and willingness to work. As a result, I was granted permission to register all children as agricultural assistants, assign them control numbers, and thus officially count them as camp inmates. One cannot imagine my joy when I returned from the commandant's office and was able to share this wonderful news with the anxiously waiting parents.

Enough years have passed to have some distance from these events. When I consider the well-known realities of the East, it seems incredible that something like this could have happened. Certainly, a great deal of pragmatic calculation played a role in carrying out this humane act—the desire to maintain our workforce and a general indifference to what happened within the camp. But the very fact that the commandant's office knew everything and tolerated it clearly shows that it was possible for superiors—even in a small labor camp—to save lives. Our guards did not think much about the presence of children, especially since they saw them gathering potatoes or performing other tasks and thus classified them as workers.

Following this, I obtained permission to establish a barrack specifically for families. Two women acted as kindergarten teachers, allowing parents to go to work with peace of mind. The children were taught reading and writing, and they were even taught various games. The camp became a community, almost as if in freedom. A “Chevra Kadisha” (Sacred Brotherhood) was established to conduct burials, and the dead were buried in proper shrouds. Religious services were held on holidays. During Passover, matzot was baked in the camp, and Orthodox Jews were reportedly kept back in the camp on the Sabbath under the pretense of being assigned cleaning duties to prevent them from working on the holy day. It all sounds unbelievable, but it really happened. The camp commandant was interested in preserving our labor force but otherwise left us in peace.

By September 1942, the camp population stood at 542 Jews, but after the final evacuation in Irena, it grew to 970. The group was a diverse mix, even in terms of nationality. The majority were Polish, followed by Slovaks, Hungarians, Austrians, and Germans from the old Reich.

The camp was also diverse in character and social background. Aside from the very small number of intellectuals, there were many craftsmen, small merchants, and also many unskilled workers and illiterates. Many, driven by selfishness and the instinct for self-preservation, sought only personal advantages, regardless of the community. Maintaining a structured camp discipline for the benefit of all was perhaps the hardest challenge. The well-intentioned were in the minority, while the undisciplined were capable of reckless actions. Additionally, almost daily, there was the nearly impossible task of maintaining an order acceptable to both the construction management and the commandant’s office. It required every ounce of concentration to stay focused on work, and I wonder today how I managed it. I believe my unyielding will to survive, my concern for my family, and my unbreakable optimism in even the most dangerous situations were the driving forces behind my success.

There were indeed many dangerous—life-threatening—situations. I will try to describe a few events that illustrate the circumstances. But first, I want to discuss the difficulties of my role as the camp’s

administrative officer. Many envied me. A foreigner was in charge—one who refused to engage in corruption, who was immune to bribes, and who insisted on Western-style order and discipline, almost like the Germans? This was unheard of for the Poles, and I made enemies even among my closest colleagues, who tried with all means—fair or foul—to bring me down. I learned of reports against me to the commandant's office, the construction management, the gendarmerie, and even the German camp leader and German supervisors of the labor groups. Only the special respect I had earned over four years through my steadfast conduct ensured that all such attempts failed. I saw many of these denunciations—they were shown to me—but I took no action, even though I certainly had the means to seek retribution. I knew that primitive revenge would only make matters worse, that I could expect even more hostility from the punished person's relatives, and that this would endanger not only me but many others as well. In this case, caution was the better part of valor, and time ultimately proved me right.

September 22 was the day of the final deportation from Irena. Early in the morning, SS officer Lieutenant Philippi visited the camp leader, Kattengel, who soon called for me. I was asked how many people were currently in the camp. I reported the number as 543.

I was then given the following categorical order with particular emphasis:

“Today, there is a deportation in Irena. No one may leave the camp. No one may go to work at Horst. Tomorrow, I will come, and if I find even a single Jew from Irena in the camp, I will ensure that the SS from Lublin liquidates the entire camp! The non-commissioned officer and you bear full responsibility for the strict enforcement of this order.”

The news was devastating. I knew that many relatives of my fellow prisoners were still in Irena. A deportation would bring despair and severely weaken the discipline we had worked so hard to maintain, putting us all in danger. What could I do under a camp leader who was all too eager to carry out orders? I dared not make such a serious decision alone. So, I decided to consult a group of respected older

men whom I highly valued—Eckhaiser, Bronspiegel, Schulmann, Dr. Kestenbaum, and Dr. Fries. Together, we decided to warn the Jews of Irena and to try to obtain a blank work assignment from the German head of the agricultural department, who was open to gifts, so that we could officially register as many Irena Jews as possible as farm workers. This would provide cover against Lieutenant Philippi. It was a well-thought-out plan—but I was the one tasked with executing it. My objections were dismissed with the phrase, “God will help.”

I set out. The “Council of Elders” secretly alerted the Jews of Irena, and as the work groups returned, over four hundred people flooded into the camp—including the nearly 80-year-old Rosenzweig couple and many children whom I was to list as workers.

The plan with the agricultural supervisor worked perfectly. A pair of new boots, a kilo of coffee, and two bottles of vodka were the “open sesame.” To avoid the appearance of a bribe, I paid the official fraction of the black-market price. At the construction office, I legalized the agricultural assignment, and in record time, I arranged the necessary paperwork. Control numbers and food stamps were issued, Kattengel was persuaded, and we anxiously awaited what would come next.

Against all expectations, Lieutenant Philippi forgot to visit, and our fear of a thorough inspection was alleviated.

Gendarmerie Master Petersen arrived at the camp and summoned Kattengel, who immediately granted him unrestricted entry, despite the strict directive from the construction management stating that entry into the Jewish camp was only permitted to outsiders with their approval. I did not dare to deny Petersen entry, even though I suspected he would only cause trouble. Petersen asked for the young man, Puterflam. When I inquired about the matter, he explained that he was investigating a report by the foreman Rudolph from the Berlin construction company Schulz, which alleged that Puterflam had repeatedly left his workplace without reason and had not shown up that day.



Ruth Wenkart (later Marcovici)
Vienna 1957

"I want to have a look at the boy," Petersen declared. Since it was nearly the end of the workday and the first groups were already marching through the gate, I had no choice but to excuse Puterflam by claiming he was ill. Puterflam was indeed an extremely frail eighteen-year-old, and it was easy to believe that he was physically incapable of enduring the grueling labor of track construction. Unfortunately, the labor assignments at Schulz were not under our control but were overseen by the Irena Labor Office. The Schulz company merely had the right to house a group of forced laborers with us if they could not be accommodated in the company's own quarters. This was arranged contractually because Schulz was also carrying out road construction projects for Horst.

I was powerless to help Puterflam and had to watch helplessly as events unfolded. At Petersen's order, Kattengel called for a roll call. All camp inmates had to assemble, and in front of everyone, Petersen shouted at Puterflam:

"Why are you sabotaging, you Jewish swine? You know how crucial it is to complete the tracks for the war effort! You know that every worker is needed!"

Puterflam timidly protested that he was ill, to which Petersen responded with a powerful strike from Kattengel's dog whip. Screaming in pain, Puterflam collapsed onto a bench behind him, and mercilessly, a hail of blows rained down on his writhing body. Puterflam staggered and fell to the ground. In an instant, his tormentor drew his pistol and shot the boy in the back of the head. A brief twitch, then his body lay still.

Then came the repulsive scene that I can only recall with the greatest disgust. Petersen pressed his boot against the dead boy's throat, causing his pain-distorted mouth to open and his bloody tongue to protrude.

A sigh of relief escaped Petersen's chest, and with a deep exhale, he concluded his crime—a crime that bore witness to the full perversion of this so-called "superhuman." Petersen undoubtedly had enough in-

telligence to understand that his act was cruel, inhumane, and sadistic. It could not be excused as mere brute force or thoughtless cruelty. Rather, it was a deliberately cultivated perversion, fueled by the incessantly propagated hatred toward all people who were not privileged to belong to the so-called master race.

The second incident also involved workers from the Schulz company. Kattengel received orders from foreman Rudolph (or perhaps even from the construction manager, Gailhorn?) to detain two specifically named workers in the camp. Lacking a designated holding cell, he devised the idea of enclosing a three-square-meter area with barbed wire at the camp's perimeter and imprisoning the men there. They spent a night within the confined space, and the next day, Rudolph arrived with the gendarme Edek. They had Kattengel hand over the detainees. Behind the camp, out of our view due to the non-commissioned officers' barracks, we heard two short gunshots. When we reached the camp gate, we were ordered to bury the dead.

This disgraceful act strengthened my resolve to have Kattengel replaced. But that was easier said than done. Openly speaking against him was not only dangerous for me but for the entire camp. To make matters worse, Kattengel had developed an intimate relationship with a young Jewish girl, whose mother and two brothers were also in the camp. She did not hesitate to exploit this connection to gain privileges—not just for herself but also for other inmates who paid for her intervention. In short, widespread corruption of the most troubling kind began to emerge, as it became known throughout the camp and could endanger everyone. Furthermore, other young girls, envious of her advantage, tried to do the same. Preventing such scandals required great tact, diplomacy, and self-control. After all, German soldiers were strictly forbidden from having any contact with Jewish women, and the consequences of such affairs could be disastrous for the entire camp.

I often had to stand guard at night to disrupt these flirtations and clandestine encounters. It is understandable that Kattengel held little sympathy for me because of this and eagerly lent his ear to inmates who harbored ill will against me, making my life more difficult. When

I consider how precarious our situation was, it is still a mystery to me how these affairs remained hidden. Even a single one of these incidents coming to light would have been enough for the SS in Lublin, to whom we were officially subordinate, to liquidate us.

Another event put us on the brink of catastrophe. Those who know how ruthlessly the SS waged war against Polish partisans will understand my terror when, during the brutal winter nights of 1943, ten Jewish partisans arrived at the camp, seeking refuge.

We had men, women, and children in the camp, ranging in age from four to seventy-five. Accepting responsibility for the inevitable massacre that would follow if the presence of partisans were discovered was unthinkable. So, I decided to consult the trusted “Council of Elders” before making a decision. Our discussion took place with extreme caution, late at night when most were asleep. In the end, we resolved to take the partisans in, as we were faced with a choice between the SS’s vengeance and that of the partisans. Our sympathies naturally lay with the partisans, yet the decision was an enormous gamble.

However, accepting the partisans did not lead to disaster—quite the opposite. When a damaged, burning aircraft crashed nearby, two partisans working on the airfield saved the pilot, a Knight’s Cross recipient, and his co-pilot. They pulled the unconscious men from the cockpit. The event caused a sensation at the airfield, and our camp’s standing improved in the eyes of all military authorities. A few months later, the two rescued pilots arrived at our camp on horseback to personally express their gratitude, commend the rescuers, and promise to advocate for the camp. We knew then that our decision had been worth it.

In March 1943, when Kattengel was replaced by Staff Sergeant Dusy, I and other responsible comrades breathed a sigh of relief. At first, we feared that Dusy, a long-serving non-commissioned officer, would be a harsh disciplinarian. Initially, it seemed so, but soon it became clear that he was approachable and open to persuasion. Most importantly, I was pleased that he did not adhere to the Nazi ideology of Jewish “subhumanity.” He often spoke to me about his positive experiences with Jews in his hometown of Königsberg.

I never felt like a suppressed prisoner—I maintained my self-respect and dignity. Knowing that Dusy recognized and respected this was a great relief. Over time, we became better acquainted, and his initial aloofness disappeared. Dusy strictly enforced the rule that no outsiders could enter the camp without authorization, preventing SS members and gendarmerie from intruding as frequently.

His tenure lasted a little over a year. During that time, we had ample opportunity to observe him. His attitude toward us was more positive than negative. Though no person is entirely good, Dusy made an effort to ease our suffering. Given all the terrible experiences we had with Germans, he was a rare exception.

Braun and Rademacher

Braun had a smug manner, always asking questions, pointing out concerns about our well-being, and particularly complaining about the presence of eggshells and chicken bones—after all, signs of good nutrition. We all in the camp struggled to appease him. Everyone feared him because he was not to be trusted.

Our hope for a cooperative relationship rested on the fact that he had a sweetheart. She would come over from outside on weekends and make requests, especially to my wife and me, which we tried to fulfill. By today's standards, they were modest demands—such as a handbag, an umbrella, a scarf, a blouse, or coffee beans—but under the circumstances at the time, obtaining such things was very difficult. Eager to stay on Braun's good side, we ensured that these wishes were always granted.

Apart from minor harassments, nothing extraordinary happened under his rule, except for one incident I must mention: In March 1944, I was summoned to the camp gate, where a car with SS officers was waiting outside. Braun was there as well. I reported to them and was ordered to assign—or name—forty tailors and seamstresses. They were to be taken to Stawy the next morning to sew uniforms for Wehrmacht auxiliaries, who were already fleeing in panic from the advancing Russians.

I myself was aware of the conditions in Stawy from information that had come to me. Executions and mistreatment of Jews were a daily occurrence, and in my view, transferring our people there meant a death sentence. I desperately thought about how I could prevent this disaster. I can only attribute it to a higher inspiration that I came up with the idea to tell the leading Hauptsturmführer that our people would be willing to take on this work additionally, in their free time, given the urgency, and that only the materials needed to be brought to the camp. I believe my proposal was well received also because, due to the unexpected influx of people in Stawy, there was a lack of space. In any case, the idea was approved, and we were able to keep our people in the camp. But the best part was that after I reported this incident to the command, the operation was refused. The delivered materials and supplies were sent back, and the whole thing fizzled out. Within the camp itself, this matter was quickly forgotten, as people generally paid more attention to their daily worries than to major events, even after significant occurrences.

This attitude is easily explained by the uncertainty of one's own fate, without any possibility of influencing it. People lived only for the present and left the future to a fortunate turn of fate. Indifference and resignation were widespread.

The year 1944 was marked by events on the collapsing Eastern Front. The relentless retreat did not escape our notice, and we also knew about the successful Western offensive of the Allies. Our informants were Poles who worked at the airbase and apparently had connections with partisans who had radio devices and received news from abroad. Even from the German side, we received information about the situation.

One time, while I was on duty heading to the command, I was approached by a uniformed German soldier who called me by name and introduced himself as an architect from Vienna. In our conversation, he mentioned the collapse of the Eastern Front and predicted that the Red Army would soon arrive in Dęblin. He offered me the opportunity to go underground with him, as he belonged to a resistance organization. He said it was the only way to save myself. He knew that when

the Germans withdrew from Poland, all Jews would be exterminated beforehand. The “scorched earth” order had already been issued. I told him that I could not abandon my family, and he regretfully took his leave.

However, I also suspected him somewhat of being an agent provocateur. Even if I had no family in the camp, I would not have accepted his proposal, out of loyalty to my comrades. I told the “Council of Elders” about the incident, and they were pleased that I was thinking so responsibly.

At the beginning of July, I was introduced by Braun to a German civilian named Bartenschlager, who questioned me about the inmates of our camp. I had no way of knowing who Bartenschlager was or what role he would still play. I knew nothing about the purpose of his visit and assumed he was a personal acquaintance of the non-commissioned officer. I answered his questions very cautiously and reservedly. He himself was surprised that Jews in Poland in 1944 still looked so well-dressed and well-fed. I explained this by saying that our diligence, discipline, and hard work had earned us recognition from the command. When he said “Goodbye” upon leaving, I had no idea how soon we would meet again. Shortly afterward, Braun was unexpectedly replaced. His successor was Sergeant Rademacher from Berlin, an older, long-serving non-commissioned officer. He negotiated with me calmly and composedly, always valuing my opinion. I suspect that the command had recommended me to him as trustworthy.

On July 14, 1944, I was summoned to the chief staff quartermaster, our highest camp authority, who informed me that due to the advancing front, our camp would be evacuated to Częstochowa, to the Warthewerk, a munitions factory. The camp would fall under factory security, not the SS, and he had already spoken with the factory security chief. He assured me that we would be treated humanely there, similarly to how we were in Dęblin.

My first concern was for the fate of the women and children, as I knew from Polish and German reports what the SS did to Jewish children. Wolfram gave me his officer’s word of honor that nothing would hap-

pen to our children. I do not know what made me doubt his word and what gave me the courage to ask him for a letter signed by Colonel Hönig, the airbase commander, to reassure our mothers and fathers. I am glad I had this idea because this letter would ultimately save 36 children. Surprisingly, Wolfram did not reject my request; on the contrary, he promised to have such a letter given to the transport leader.

At this meeting, our labor deployment leader, the German Pole Wiszniewski, was present. He was ordered to prepare the camp for transport in three groups. The dates were set: Group I on July 17, Group II on July 20, and the last group on July 23, 1944. Wolfram explicitly insisted that the children be included proportionally so they would not stand out in large numbers and risk being singled out. Wiszniewski promised to follow orders and also to ensure family unity.

With very mixed feelings, I left the command and returned to the camp, full of concern. Our situation in Dęblin had been bearable compared to other camps, but what awaited us in Częstochowa?

From the command to the camp was about 2,500 meters. I rode a bicycle. Usually, it took ten minutes, but this time, I took almost twice as long. Filled with worry, I pondered the consequences of our relocation. I knew the dangers we faced under German rule. We were at the mercy of an individual's whims, and the coming days were uncertain. Everything depended on chance. What were our chances of survival? All we had was hope.

What I had not accounted for was the reaction of my fellow inmates. That evening, I gathered the entire workforce, except for the children, and informed them of my conversation with Wolfram, including my efforts to secure the safety of the children and the written assurance. At first, there was dead silence. Then, an uproar of unexpected proportions erupted. Hysterical screaming broke out, like during a shipwreck. The crowd was in turmoil—otherwise calm men shouted over each other, mothers shrieked about the impending doom of their children, and everyone talked about escaping the camp. No reasonable argument was heard. It was as if hell had been unleashed.

I realized that the crowd was unreliable and called the “Council of Elders” to the office, as I could not get them to listen to reason. We discussed how to manage the relocation with as little hardship as possible, especially ensuring families were not separated, as we did not fully trust the promise that the entire camp would be transferred together. It was a very long discussion, and we went to bed filled with worry. The next morning, red eyes showed that hardly anyone had slept.

In the days leading up to our relocation, I witnessed more human weaknesses, ingratitude, and shortcomings than in my entire life. An unparalleled selfishness was unleashed. Formerly friendly faces contorted into grimaces, calm voices became shrill, and sheer fear made me the perfect scapegoat.

As the first transport left on July 17, under the supervision of seemingly trustworthy militia soldiers, our spirits calmed slightly. Events at the front escalated, and on July 22, we received the order to prepare for departure. The sight of waiting freight cars led some to suggest mass escape, but with women, children, and elderly people, such an attempt would have been suicide.

On the morning of July 23, we were finally loaded onto the trains. As we departed, we heard the distant rumble of the advancing front.

Częstochowa

Late in the evening of July 25, we arrived in Częstochowa. Rademacher called the Warthewerk, our future place of stay, and was informed that we would be picked up the next day. We spent the night restlessly in the wagons. In the morning, the detached freight cars were moved from the sidings to the factory premises.

The sight of the electrified factory fence, the high watchtowers, and the heavily armed factory guards at the gate gave us a foreboding of a grim fate. We could see little more through the narrow gaps in the doors. When the train stopped, the wagon doors were flung open from the outside with shouting, and we were met by a crowd of factory guards in green uniforms. Some aimed submachine guns at us, while others lashed out wildly with whips, driving us out of the wagons.

We had no illusions about arriving in good conditions, but none of us had expected it to be this bad. Despair overtook us. I was accused of lacking the courage to make a better decision in Dęblin, and some claimed they could already smell gas when they saw the tall factory chimneys spewing thick smoke. To make matters worse, our children were separated from us. We had to put down our luggage and assemble for roll call in the vast factory courtyard, separated into men and women.

Sergeant Rademacher and his accompanying soldiers stood indifferently to the side, as if they had nothing to do with us. Our hope of be-



Klara und Herrmann Wenkart
ca. 1957, Vienna

ing under the Wehrmacht's protection was shattered. A deep sorrow overcame me, and I feared as never before for the fate of my comrades and, above all, for my family. Up until now, even in the most hopeless situations, I had always kept my head up, always found some glimmer of hope. But this time, I truly believed our end had come.

To the side, the heavily guarded children were crying and calling out for their parents. Being separated from Ruthi, my mother-in-law, and my wife—without knowing what would become of them or of myself—was a crushing blow. No wonder I doubted myself. Had I been right to trust Wolfram's assurances? These were moments of utter despair.

For over half an hour, we stood in formation, surrounded by factory guards who watched us grimly and menacingly, their submachine guns at the ready. Their ominous looks were so oppressive that we could only stare in silence at the children standing to the side. The wait for the factory security chief lasted only half an hour, but under such psychological strain, it felt like an eternity. We were so consumed by fear that we forgot to express any pain or make a single sound.

Finally, the awaited man arrived, accompanied by his deputy, Keutsch, and some factory guards. Since he wore a dark uniform resembling that of the SS, I did not immediately recognize him. It was only when he called out loudly, "Where is Wenkart?" and ordered me to step forward that I realized it was Bartenschlager—the very same Bartenschlager who had interrogated me in the camp about the prisoners, assessing their suitability for labor. His personal address snapped me out of my lethargy, and I regained some courage. My innate optimism gave me hope once more.

Snapping to attention, as I had done in Dęblin, I reported my name and the arrival of the Dęblin camp members. Without waiting for a reaction, I immediately said, "Herr Factory Security Chief, we have the word of honor of a German officer and a written document guaranteeing our protection. I hope the word of a colonel still holds and that nothing will happen to our children." Thankfully, he did not interrupt me. Only after I finished speaking did he ask, "Where is this letter?"

"Our transport leader, Rademacher, has it," I answered immediately. Rademacher was summoned and handed the letter to Bartenschlager. He tore open the envelope, unfolded the letter, and read it—once, then again—shaking his head as we anxiously watched his face, awaiting his decision. I did not know what was written in the letter, so I was very surprised when Bartenschlager, after reading it, asked, "Wenkart, is your child among them? You can have yours, but the others must leave the camp."

I protested, "Herr Factory Security Chief, this is not about my child. Either all or none! But if you do not return our children, then shoot me right now, because I was a fool to trust the word of a German officer."

I saw that my words had an effect. Around me, unrest spread, and it seemed the guards were just waiting for an order to punish me for my audacity. Bartenschlager turned away without a word and ordered his deputy to take the men and then the women to their quarters. The children were to be housed separately outside the camp. No final decision was made about their fate.

Dejected, we followed our guards to our factory quarters. The only glimmer of hope in our bleak situation was that we knew our children were housed in a wooden hut outside the camp, surrounded by a garden. We could see them playing, and even exchange calls with them. One remark from Ruthi, who was not even six years old at the time, has stayed with me because it shows how serious-minded she was: "They wanted to give us tea, but we didn't drink it—it could be poisoned!" What must have been going on in the minds of such children to have thoughts like that?

The effects of the separation varied. Some of the affected parents wailed loudly, while most were in a state of despair so deep it was almost manic. These desperate ones turned on me, spurred on by members of the first transport, who had also had their children taken away. Nothing was known about the fate of the sixteen children from that group, and they heaped unimaginable abuse on me. I endured it all without the slightest feeling of guilt.

Those were two bitter days for me. While I understood the parents' anguish, their baseless accusations and foul insults wounded me deeply.

On the third day, as if by a miracle, the children were returned to us in the camp. The factory security chief's wife was about to give birth, and the attending midwife had urged her to intervene so that the Jewish children would be returned to their parents.

I will never forget that day as long as I live. If my faith had ever wavered, this event made me believe again. Not only did the children's return spark joy throughout the camp, but it also brought me personal relief.

Bartenschlager himself later told Jolles, the camp elder—loud enough for many to hear—"Only Wenkart's intervention made me decide to let the children return to the camp."

I do not believe that. More likely, his concern for his own newborn played a role. But I am certain that my actions helped ensure that the children were not taken away on the very day of our arrival, as had happened with the first transport.

Collapse

The return of our children made us forget that on the very first day, we had been robbed of our belongings, subjected to body searches for hidden valuables, and even stripped of our outer garments. We were assigned to barracks wearing only skirts and trousers. Everything was filthy and poorly furnished. Only the infirmary, under the direction of a good doctor from Białystok, was comparable to the conditions in Dęblin. The food was nowhere near as good—we received not even 700 calories a day. If not for bakers working in the city of Częstochowa who smuggled bread into the camp daily, many would have starved to death.

Two of my Viennese comrades, my deputy Großmann and the quartermaster Pollak, could not endure the hardships. They fell ill and died in Częstochowa. The camp inmates worked in the munitions factory, some at the machines, others transporting loads. In total, 2,000 people worked there, strictly guarded by the Ukrainian factory security force—Russian defectors who opposed Bolshevism and were not exactly friendly towards Jews. Their commander was Bartenschlager, assisted by Keutsch, who took pleasure in playing the tough man, strutting through the camp with a whip and lashing it down on a Jew's back at the slightest provocation. Our children would hide without a trace the moment they heard that this sadist was coming.

In numerous conversations with long-time camp inmates, mostly from Kraków, our descriptions of the conditions in Dęblin were met

with disbelief. Had they not seen with their own eyes our relatively healthy appearance, our clothing, and our luggage—which suggested a neutral foreign country rather than forced labor camps in the East—they would never have believed us.

It was heartbreaking to watch the work crews line up early in the morning, dressed in tattered clothes, their faces blackened with machine oil, emaciated by hunger, and then march into the factory halls, which were just as uninviting. We called these unfortunate souls the “Mongols.” The work hours were from 7 AM to noon and then from 1 PM to 6 PM—a total of ten hours a day, which was a long time given the inadequate nutrition. The only exception was Saturday, when work ended at noon, followed by cleaning duties in the camp and factory. The same happened on Sunday mornings. The only hours we had to ourselves were on Sunday afternoons. That was when conversations took place, bodies were given a more thorough cleaning, and—above all—plans were made.

What would happen when we were free? Each of us built castles in the air, imagined a wonderful life, and tried, through these illusions, to forget the cruel reality for a few hours. Precisely because we did not know if we would live to see the next day, precisely because everything was so hopeless, we planned—boldly and confidently—to keep from losing the last shred of our self-respect.

The exhausting work drained us so completely that after our meager evening meal, we would collapse onto our primitive bunks, staring blankly ahead. Few managed to sleep. The coming morning was too uncertain, the present too bleak, and the future too full of unanswered questions.

A recurring topic of conversation was the comparison between Cześćchowa and Dęblin. The difference was stark! Both camps were not under the feared SS but rather under the Wehrmacht (Dęblin) and the factory security force (Cześćchowa), which in turn answered to the civilian factory management.

Nevertheless, the difference was glaring. In my opinion, the blame lay with the factory security chief, Bartenschlager, as well as the Jew-

ish camp elder, Jolles, who obediently carried out all orders. But I also held the factory director and his civilian foremen responsible. In Dęblin, many of the construction supervisors were always trying to improve and ease the suffering of the Jews. I remember names like Thiele, Gall, and Leistikov, as well as construction manager Figura and many department heads who treated us better than we ever experienced in Częstochowa.

Bartenschlager had introduced the kapo system, typical of concentration camps, through Jolles. These kapos were responsible for maintaining order in the camp. To their credit, I must say that I never heard any complaints about them during my time there.

I was assigned to the bathhouse, which also contained a large disinfection boiler. My task was to hang the dirty laundry of the factory workers in the boiling vat and, after disinfection, pass it on to the adjacent laundry facility. Once cleaned and repaired, the laundry was returned for exchange. This was only possible because the clothing of our transport had been confiscated and added to the depot. The bathhouse kapo had to enforce strict discipline, as there was constant conflict between the inmates from Częstochowa, whose clothing was already in tatters, and those from Dęblin, who had brought better garments. These disputes, as well as other minor issues, often escalated into loud arguments. Quelling these conflicts required great authority, which kapo Weiß possessed—even without being harsh.

Dipping and removing garments from the boiling disinfection solution, surrounded by the hot, suffocating steam, took a heavy toll on me. In the nearly six months I worked there, I lost almost twenty kilograms. That it wasn't more, I owed to the selflessness of my wife.

She worked in the factory security kitchen as a potato peeler and cleaner. As a reward for her difficult work, she received a liter of stew containing meat, barley, potatoes, and a lot of bacon. She brought this as a supplement to the meager camp rations for my mother-in-law, Ruthi, and me. We always devoured the meal greedily—too late realizing that my wife was going without, claiming she had already eaten. Eventually, she grew so visibly thin that I protested. But she simply

replied, "First, I must keep you alive. You must survive. A life without you is meaningless to me." I was deeply moved by this declaration.

It was a terrible year, and then came January 15, 1945. We in the camp were more or less aware of the front lines, as a resistance group had formed under the leadership of our camp doctor, who had radio contact with the partisans.

It was said that the deportation of the camp into the interior of Germany was imminent, and indeed, the first transport was dispatched on January 15. It was sent to Buchenwald, with many casualties.

Soon after the first group of factory workers departed, we noticed unrest and uncertainty among our civilian supervisors. It was clear that they were thinking more about themselves than about work. Even the factory security force had lost much of its usual arrogance. We even noticed that Keutsch was no longer carrying his ever-present whip.

There was no longer any real work in the factory. Production had completely ceased, and the Mongols were put to work dismantling machines, while we—especially the resistance group—carefully observed the foremen's mysterious activities. We rightly feared that the factory, with its abundant supply of explosives, would be blown up with us inside when the front approached.

In the camp office, transport lists were being prepared, and the deportation was being organized. Fortunately, since my wife worked for the factory security force, she and I were assigned to the last transport.

Great anxiety and fear gripped us when, on January 16, Ukrainian Waffen-SS troops arrived at the camp. We all feared the worst—liquidation. Everyone's nerves were stretched to the breaking point.

The resistance group issued an order: if there was any sign of execution preparations, we were to fight back as hard as possible—there were weapons ready.

The emotions we felt for our wives and children can only be compared to those of a condemned man awaiting his execution. We looked up at the overcast sky, and it felt like our prayers were answered when, suddenly, an air raid alarm sounded and Russian planes appeared overhead. We were ordered into the barracks, while the Germans took cover in the bomb shelters.

The explosions of the falling bombs did not bother us inside the barracks, where a heated discussion began about what would happen next.

One decision was clear: we would delay every deportation as much as possible—to stall until the Russians arrived. And if danger arose, we would retreat into the barracks to avoid execution on the camp grounds.

It was an uncertain plan—but the next day, it would prove to be a brilliant one.

The bombardment lasted all day, and when the all-clear was given late in the evening, it was too late to organize the second transport. We received the food that had not been distributed at midday and were instructed to pack all our belongings and be ready for transport. I spent the seemingly endless night with my family—none of us could sleep, no matter how exhausted we were.

At last, dawn began to break. I left the barrack to visit the latrine and, at the same time, to see what was happening outside. My first glance was toward the bivouac of the Waffen-SS troops who had arrived the previous day. When I saw nothing, I naturally assumed they had positioned themselves somewhere, ready to receive us. I could not have known that what we had perceived as an aerial bombardment was already the thunder of artillery, signaling the proximity of the front lines.

The camp came to life. A fine drizzle fell. Keutsch, without his whip, went into all five barracks and said: “Everyone must form up by barrack for transport. Wagons are ready at the station. No more work will be done in Częstochowa.”

When asked about our destination, he said he believed it was Gleiwitz but was not sure.

The mere fact that he allowed the question and was even willing to answer it made us sense a change in the times. Who among us would have dared to ask Keutsch a question before? A whip blow would have been the inevitable response.

Around nine in the morning, the first barrack was called up. Each name was read aloud, and the delayed responses of each man took up a lot of time. Just as they were finishing, and the second barrack began to be called, the inmates of the first barrack slowly shuffled back inside. The same thing happened when the third barrack was called. The other two barracks were never even reached. Despite Keutsch's screaming and fits of rage, and the efforts of his obedient camp elder, the pattern kept repeating. As soon as one barrack was called outside and the names were read, everyone withdrew inside as soon as the next barrack was called. We seemed to obey, but Keutsch was driven almost mad.

The short winter day passed, and just as darkness fell, another air raid alarm sounded. The call of "Everyone into the barracks!" was music to our ears. I made plans with my family. If men and women were separated during transport, I felt obliged to arrange with a friendly couple from Prešov that Mrs. Wahrmann, a young and resolute woman, would take care of my family. I wanted to ease the burden on my wife, who had to care for my 75-year-old mother and six-year-old Ruthi. In return, I promised to look after Mr. Wahrmann, who was less agile.

Bombs fell near our factory complex, striking a nearby paper factory. We saw bright flames shoot up and heard explosions. In terror, we rushed outside, fearing the fire might spread to our wooden barracks. The factory itself, which was said to store an unknown quantity of explosives, also seemed at risk. We all remembered Keutsch's words: the factory was rigged for destruction to prevent it from falling into Russian hands. That was supposed to make us more willing to march out. After the liberation, we learned that machine guns had been set up at the entrance gate, ready to mow us down at the slightest disturbance.

The Warta River flowed beside our barrack, and I had my family step into the water at the riverbank to escape the inferno. I myself went to the factory gate to see what was happening. It was night, the sky eerily red from the flames, and the constant crashing of explosions frayed our nerves. What a liberating feeling it was when we heard a loudspeaker announcement: "All Germans to the gate immediately!" We sensed that salvation from fear, terror, and mortal danger had finally arrived. Liberation seemed near.

Our hopes were strengthened when we saw our comrades wearing steel helmets and carrying machine pistols, led by the camp doctor holding a revolver. They drove the Ukrainian factory guards before them. A cry rang out from all lips: "We are free!" People embraced, tears streaming down their faces, without caring whether they knew each other or not. Comrades stormed the storage rooms and distributed bread and canned food to the starving prisoners.

On January 17, Red Army tank units entered the factory. We learned that the Germans had been surprised and attacked from the rear through a flanking maneuver, making it possible for a Jewish camp to be liberated without evacuation for the first time.

It is impossible to describe the elation that followed the liberation from barbaric oppression.

I hope my words have proven that every German, if they wished, could have acted humanely toward the persecuted and oppressed, even in the most precarious situations, without putting themselves in danger. Many may see my fate as an exception, but I believe it only further exposes the web of lies in which Nazi leaders ensnared the public. It was not some inevitable fate that led to this inferno, which defied all notions of culture and humanity. It was the willingness of so many to participate in the crimes, the sheer moral indifference, and the lack of will to act humanely that made it possible. The passivity of the indifferent, the collaboration of the willing, and the negligence of many—also from other nations—created the vacuum of humanity from which we have yet to fully recover.

No whitewashing, no denial, no so-called “coming to terms” can obscure this reality. Only a clear and unequivocal rejection of the perpetrators—whether those who carried out the crimes with their own hands, those who devised the ideological foundation from their desks, or those who issued the orders—can consign this shameful past to history. It will remain alive for as long as criminals from that time walk free and rise unpunished to high positions. Only the dying out of that cursed generation will truly close this chapter.

My examples should make it clear that there was no such thing as an unavoidable “necessity to follow orders” for leading Nazis. Whether an officer or a soldier in a camp, each had the ability to prevent atrocities in their own way. Those who shed blood did so willingly and with full knowledge of their actions. They knew that the mass murder of women, children, and the elderly—of innocent people—was wrong, that the persecution of Jews, Roma, and others declared enemies of the regime was a crime. Any remotely responsible German must have recognized the injustice of these acts, even if they were sanctioned by the authorities, and must have realized they bore responsibility.

Perhaps I am simplifying a highly complex matter, but I want to make one thing clear: these horrors were not an inescapable fate for those who became accomplices.

For those within my view, however, any claim to leniency has been forfeited—they should bear the full weight of the law. The claim that most of them “did not know what they were doing” is likely a post-war fabrication. The broad outlines of the truth were clear to nearly everyone. The Eichmann trial proved beyond doubt that the “Final Solution” was widely known, even before the Wannsee Conference, and was propagated in Nazi publications like *Das Schwarze Korps*.

At the very least, those who carried out the actions, eyewitnesses, and through them an even wider circle, knew about the mass murder of millions, the theft from countless victims, and the sheer lawlessness of these crimes.

I reject the idea of collective guilt, as I know from my own experience that many Germans did everything in their power to alleviate the suffering of the persecuted. But I cannot absolve many others of complicity. It is essential that all decent people clearly distance themselves from the perpetrators so that these crimes are never silently accepted—and never repeated.



Klara & Herrmann Wenkart
Vienna 1957

Homecoming

We stayed in Częstochowa for a few more days, surviving on the camp's supplies, which were now being distributed in a somewhat organized manner by a newly formed committee. The inactivity, the rumbling of the Stalin organs (rocket launchers), and the fear that we might fall back into the hands of the Germans drove me to leave the camp. My destination was Kraków, in the already liberated Polish hinterland. The odyssey of the eight-day, 128-kilometer march that I undertook with my wife is impossible to describe in its entirety, with all its hardships and dangers, so I will limit myself to the most striking episodes.

It must have been January 23rd when I set out, carrying three loaves of bread and two kilograms of soap from the factory warehouse. Due to the severe frost—about minus twenty degrees—my mother-in-law and child remained in the camp. In Kraków, I hoped to secure an apartment through the JUS (Jewish Support Office), from which I had previously received medical supplies for the Dęblin camp and which I still believed to exist. We lacked proper outer clothing. Instead of a coat, I wore a heavy scarf and a blanket; my wife wore a light coat with a camp blanket over it, made of a mixture of cotton and paper fibers, which provided little warmth. The strong wind whipped our faces, and our breath turned into tiny ice crystals the moment it left our mouths. Nevertheless, our spirits were not low. With every step, with every kilometer, we knew we were escaping the place of our captivity.

Since I did not speak Polish and speaking German was unwise, I memorized a few sentences in Russian to respond to the Russian patrols that appeared frequently. I always stated that I was a Jewish concentration camp prisoner to avoid trouble. When trucks carrying Russian soldiers stopped, I never dared to ask for a ride—partly because of my wife, who only spoke German, and partly because I sensed that my Jewish identity did not make me particularly welcome. Every time I used the Russian word for Jew, “Jiwree,” during an inspection, the initially friendly faces visibly darkened. This made me cautious, and I tried to avoid encounters altogether.

After about twenty kilometers of walking, we reached a small village in the evening. I went to the village elder, the “Wójt,” and asked for a place to stay. He sent us to a widow with a young daughter, who offered my wife and me a shared bed in the kitchen. The exceptionally warm welcome quickly made us forget the day’s hardships. We were immediately offered hot tea and given fragrant pork lard. After washing ourselves in warm water, we slept in a soft bed for the first time in nearly four years. We woke up rested the next morning, were given warm milk, and, in gratitude for their hospitality, gave them two bars of soap, which they lacked.

At our heartfelt farewell—the two women spoke German—they warned us about the AK (Armia Krajowa), the Polish national underground army, which killed Jews as bloodthirstily as the SS did. I later learned how justified this warning was. Many of my fellow prisoners from Dęblin fell victim to this murderous gang after liberation. To avoid them, we steered clear of industrial towns and instead followed the main road to Będzin. We had been told that the AK avoided highways because they feared Red Army patrols.

At nightfall, after a bitterly cold day with nothing but dry bread in our stomachs, we saw a lone farmhouse by the roadside. Despite a loudly barking giant dog, I bravely knocked on the door and asked the farmer for shelter for the night. After questioning us about where we came from and where we were going, he let us in and prepared a straw bed for us in the entrance hall. We also saw his wife, who, like him, was rather gruff and unfriendly. It was clear that we were not welcome,

and only the grim cold kept them from turning us away. Exhausted, we sank into the straw and covered ourselves with our blankets. Soon, we fell into a restless sleep, from which I was awakened around midnight by strange noises.

When I opened my eyes, I was paralyzed with fear. The farmer entered the room with a long knife in his hand, followed by his wife carrying a bucket of boiling water. I gave my wife a rough nudge, convinced that they were about to kill us. I quickly wrapped my hand in the blanket, ready to defend ourselves, determined to sell our lives as dearly as possible. But my fighting resolve turned into a sigh of relief when the farmer explained that we could go back to sleep—he was on his way to the barn because a cow was giving birth. I followed him to the barn to see for myself but left soon after, not wanting to witness the birth.

In the morning, we were given milk and received two loaves of fresh bread and canned sausage from a traveling Red Army field bakery. After another exhausting march, we reached the town of Będzin, where we met other liberated Jews who welcomed us warmly. We were served a hearty stew with plenty of meat and noodles, tea, and had a long conversation about the past.

Our host's family had spent three years hiding in an underground dug-out in the forest. They had survived only with the help of Polish villagers who, in exchange for large sums of gold, provided them with food. Their life in a concealed forest trench was so full of danger that our time in the camp seemed almost bearable in comparison to their suffering. For days without sunlight, packed tightly in a tiny space filled with the stench of their own waste, without any real way to clean themselves—and this for years...

We stayed in Będzin for three days, as our hosts insisted we wait until the biting cold subsided. The four-person family lived in just one room and a small shop, simply furnished. Despite their own hardships, they took us in, fed us, and even gave us provisions for our journey—a true example of selflessness, especially considering that they had spent years isolated from the world, completely at the mercy of their greedy helpers.

Strengthened and rested, we set off again. The harsh frost had eased slightly, and the winter sun shone in a clear sky. That day, we covered more than thirty kilometers. The cold, the worry about our relatives still in Częstochowa, and the determination to escape the war zone drove us forward.

By evening, we reached a suburb of Kraków. At the entrance to the town, there was a Russian checkpoint. I was separated from my wife and brought before an officer, who interrogated me for two hours. They searched me and my belongings thoroughly and asked me the most absurd questions in German. At the end, the officer gave an order I did not understand, and I was placed in a small, windowless room where I had to spend the night alone.

In that prison, the most terrible thoughts ran through my mind—deportation to the Russian hinterland, even execution. I suspected a trap in the interrogation conducted in German, and only my often-emphasized social democratic background gave me hope. The highly intelligent Russian officer had asked me many questions about Marxism, but his inscrutable expression gave me no clue as to whether my knowledgeable answers had impressed him. My ignorance of military matters, such as the condition and morale of the German army, surely did not hurt me either.

The next morning, they brought me tea, bread, and jam, and soon after, I was led into a large common room—where my wife was waiting. We embraced, tears in our eyes, and left the command post with a Russian-issued travel permit. My wife had spent the night in the common room with about thirty people of both sexes. Unable to understand anyone due to the language barrier, she had spent the night in deep anxiety over my fate.

The fortunate outcome of this intermezzo quickened our steps, and by around one o'clock in the afternoon, we had completed the ten-kilometer journey into the city center. We stood in front of the JUS building. There were no signs outside indicating an office, which surprised me greatly, as I had imagined a large organization. After all, the Jewish Relief Agency was listed under the protection of the International Red

Cross in Geneva on its letterhead and was responsible for distributing medication, Ovomaltine, Vigantol, powdered milk, and bandages to Jews in SS camps.

In the courtyard, I discovered a warehouse with a tiny office, apparently looted, as only empty crates and packaging remained. My optimism plummeted to zero, and I reproached myself severely for having subjected my wife and myself to such hardships in pursuit of a mere illusion. The disappointment was immense. Unable to make any further decisions and as it was already getting dark, I asked the janitor who had accompanied me through the warehouse for permission to spend the night in the office. He had referred me to the city's social welfare office, where I intended to try my luck the next day.

He provided us with some hot tea, and we choked down liverwurst and dry bread as a meager supper in a rather dejected mood. In the dirty, unheated room, covered with coarse blankets and plenty of packing paper, we spent the night, dozing off occasionally, and were relieved when morning finally came.

The local relief committee did, in fact, assign us a well-furnished apartment that had been vacated by the Germans, already inhabited by fellow sufferers. We were given a room to ourselves, along with money, medication for my wife, and ample food, allowing us to spend the next few days without much worry. Unfortunately, my wife's worsening illness made hospitalization necessary. We had to go to Katowice, as it was the only place where hospitals were still operational. Clinging to the footboard of an overcrowded tram, we made our way there. Everywhere I pleaded for help for my feverish wife, but I was turned away.

In utter despair, I approached a Catholic priest whom I recognized by his cassock and asked for advice. My account seemed to shake him, as he gave me tips that initially seemed implausible but later proved extremely useful. He advised me to go to the Russian guard in Bogucice, a suburb, and, accompanied by soldiers, demand my wife's admission to a hospital run by nuns, as she would likely be turned away otherwise. For myself, he suggested that I claim to have a Christian parent

and register at a Caritas camp, where I could wait out the war in relative safety in exchange for a little work.

I owe a great deal to this man, who seemed like a saving angel. Everything he suggested worked. A fearsome-looking Russian soldier with a machine gun slung over his shoulder accompanied me to the hospital, and the admitting doctor did not dare refuse us. After diagnosing my wife with a fever of 40.1°C, she was given a bath and taken to a hospital room. The scene on the staircase was heart-wrenching when my wife cried out in despair, “This is my end. I will not leave here alive!” My words of comfort were met with disbelief. I, too, had little hope, as the doctor told me that only good nutrition and air with less coal dust than that in Katowice could help her.

Relieved that my wife was now safely in a hospital bed, I went to Caritas, where I received clean shelter in an emergency barracks and sufficient food. My willingness to help soon caught the attention of the nuns in charge. They listened to my story and soon offered me a job as a kitchen helper for decent pay. I accepted immediately, as I wanted to work—not only to distract myself from my worries but also because my thoughts were constantly filled with fear for my wife, my mother-in-law, and my child, who had remained in Częstochowa. The sparse information I received about them did little to ease my concern. Since I was stuck in Katowice, I asked a Polish acquaintance to inquire about their whereabouts. The news he brought was devastating.

A fire, apparently caused by overheating, had broken out in a barracks, and my mother-in-law had suffered a heart attack and was buried in the Częstochowa cemetery. Our orphaned daughter, Ruthi, had been taken to Łódź by a fellow inmate from Dęblin. Later, I managed to track down her address and brought her to me in Katowice.

My wife remained in the hospital for four weeks, but the time passed quickly, and I was able to speed up her recovery with vitamins. As a surprise, I had arranged for a private lodging with a Volksdeutscher, a favor from the kind-hearted nuns. It was just a small furnished room with a single window, but to us, it felt like a palace. It had a small iron stove that we fueled with coal from the mines, creating a cozy warmth

that made us feel at home. Best of all, after many hardships, we were reunited with Ruthi.

The only cloud over our joy was my wife's occasional severe asthma attacks, which we managed to alleviate with Asthmolsin injections. I soon learned how to administer them myself.

Around May 1, 1945, we read in the Polish newspapers that the Red Army was advancing and that Vienna was already free. Our longing to return home grew immense, especially after seeing an old Viennese film in a cinema a few days earlier. The sight of the Ringstraße, the Parliament, and City Hall moved us so deeply that tears streamed down our faces. We resolved to leave, despite our relatively comfortable life and the dangers we anticipated. It was no small undertaking, given the widespread insecurity.

One was at the mercy of marauding occupation soldiers, and even the newly formed Polish militia was no guarantee of safety. But our yearning for Vienna overcame all doubts. On the morning of May 1, we went to Katowice station to find a way to depart. The direct route via Oderberg-Prerau-Lundenburg was impossible, as German troops were still fighting in the Ostrava coal region, cutting off the route. Moreover, I wanted to avoid combat zones. Our only option was a long detour through free Slovakia via Krosno-Debrecen-Budapest-Bratislava.

We boarded a coal freight train despite the prohibition and traveled undisturbed until late evening. We spent the night in a small station's waiting room and caught another freight train in the morning. During the journey, we witnessed a Hungarian soldier, a former German ally, being identified and summarily executed by Russian soldiers. They threw his body off the train without hesitation. We watched in horror, reflecting on how little a human life was worth in those times. Even he had a right to a trial.

Later, we were forced off the train ourselves but managed to board another soon after, arriving in Krosno on the Polish-Slovak border. There, a Jewish committee assigned us money and accommodation with a Jewish couple. However, my wife fell seriously ill again, suf-

fering severe asthma attacks due to a bad cold. The doctor forbade further travel, and I often had to administer injections to relieve her breathing difficulties. It was a hard time, but with the help of kind people, we got through it.

Once she recovered, my wife insisted we continue our journey home as soon as possible. Luck was on our side. A Red Cross train carrying sick concentration camp survivors was about to depart for Debrecen. Without hesitation, I gathered our few belongings and jumped onto the already moving train at the last moment.

After a series of hardships, we finally crossed a pontoon bridge over the Danube and stepped onto Austrian soil. A Russian truck brought us to the Urania in Vienna's first district. Our odyssey had ended. Despite the destruction in Vienna, our hearts were light.

A chapter of our lives, written in blood and tears, had finally closed.



Emmanuel Stein, Maria Winter (later Stein)
Horn ca 1900

Sworn Declaration

March 2, 1946

By chance, I learned that Mr. Hermann Wenkart was being attacked by certain fellow camp inmates due to his role as a camp leader. However, I had the opportunity to closely observe Wenkart from August 1941 to January 15, 1944, and in the interest of truth, I must make the following sworn statement. I am prepared to testify to the accuracy of my statements before any forum at any time.

I was a construction clerk at the company Autheried, which in 1941 was carrying out work at the Deblin Air Base. In August 1941, during the construction of the barbed wire fence around the Jewish camp, I met Wenkart, who was working as a clerk. From the beginning, his way of acting stood out to me. His dedication to the Jews under his supervision, his care, and his camaraderie were so unparalleled that we, who were obligated to serve, were in awe of his courage and energy, especially given the immense danger to life that every Jew—especially those in leadership positions—faced under the General Government.

I personally witnessed Wenkart, at great personal risk, confront sadistic German officers, thereby preventing the mistreatment of Jews. Countless times, he rescued camp inmates from imprisonment, which would have put them in mortal danger.

During the deportation from Deblin on May 6, 1942, it was Wenkart who initiated a plan involving the site manager of the company, Engi-

neer Kozak, to hide over 100 Jews, including three women, in a warehouse belonging to the company—thus saving them from the SS, who were deporting over 1,600 Jews (only those deemed able to work) to an unknown fate, possibly death.

In October 1941, the Luftwaffe construction management dissolved the Jewish camp, and Wenkart—who was highly respected by the entire company—was transferred, along with 102 Jews, into the employment of Autheried. Wenkart became a group leader and was responsible for payroll, work assignments, and the welfare of the Jewish workers.

Regarding his work with us until he took over as camp leader in July 1942, not only I but also the following Vienna-based individuals can testify:

Ing. Kozak, former construction manager

(Vienna XVI, Friedmannngasse 1a)

Maierhofer, worker (Vienna X, Troststraße 81)

Hammermaier, worker (Vienna XIX, Heiligenstädter Straße 84/53/10)

Wenkart ensured that the Jewish workers under his supervision were treated humanely, which was unheard of in the entire Eastern region at the time. Not only that, but he also secured higher wages than prescribed by disguising them as piecework and overtime payments. Additionally, Wenkart successfully negotiated food subsidies for the Jewish workers from German and Polish authorities, which we had thought impossible.

His own work performance was not only exemplary and flawless in every way, but his dedication to his fellow sufferers was so extraordinary that we at the company often mentioned him as a shining example in the years that followed.

In October 1942, we were transferred to Slonim, but I remained in contact with the Deblin Jewish camp because, thanks to Wenkart's initiative, I was able to help his Viennese comrades (Engel, Pollak, Grossmann, and Gärtler) by using my business trips to Vienna to de-

liver news and packages from Vienna to Deblin several times a year. During my frequent visits to the camp, I was repeatedly able to confirm that Wenkart risked his life time and again for the benefit of the Jews. I must express my astonishment that Wenkart is being attacked by anyone at all.

I am currently the elected chairman of the workers' council at Autheried (which employs about 500 people) and was nominated by all three political parties. If irresponsible individuals, who may have themselves harmed the camp, are attacking a selfless person like Mr. Wenkart, I see it as my personal duty to take a stand against this.

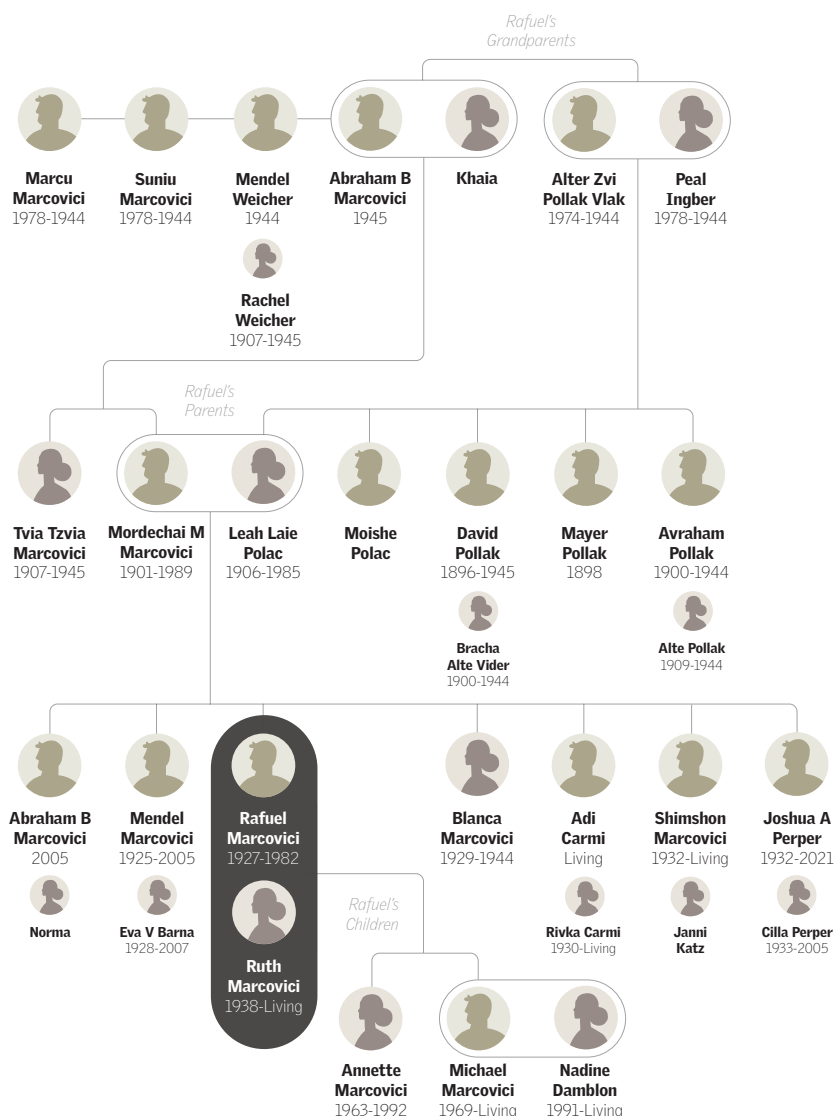
I am prepared to testify to my statements in person and under oath at any time.

Julius Haczek

Vienna 20, LeystraÙe 23/16/4

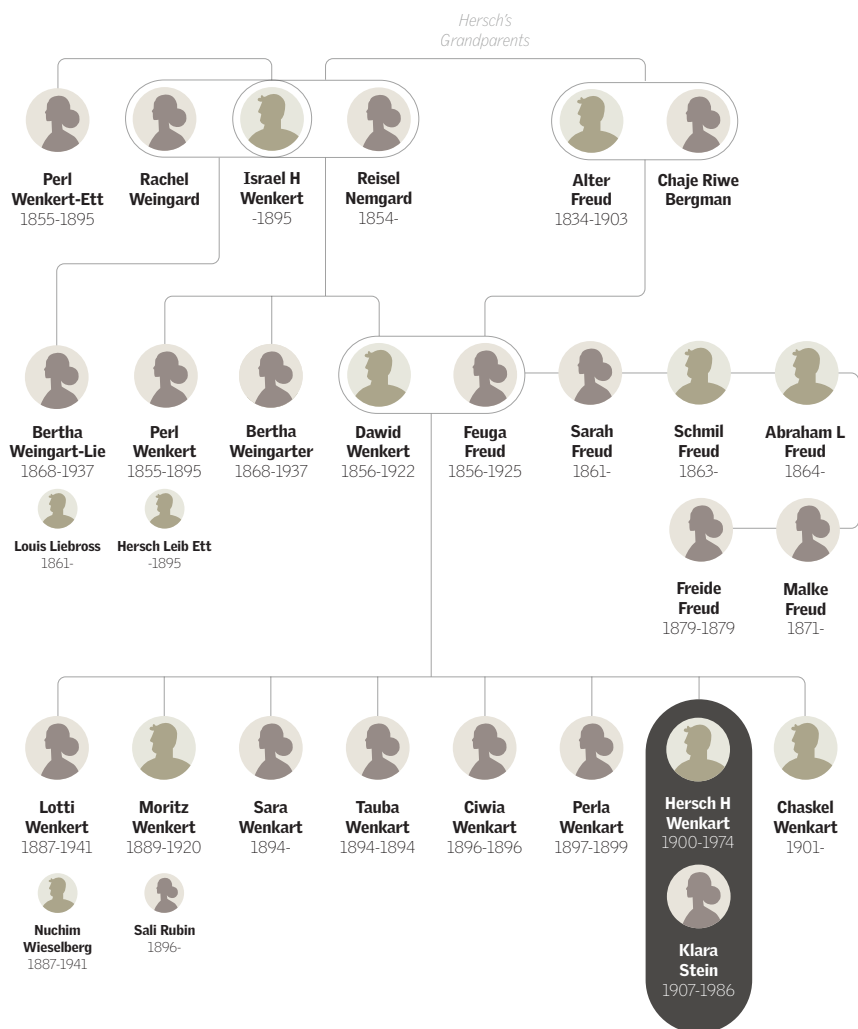
Family Tree of the MARCOVICI Family

The family originates **from Budesti, Romania**. Based on the recorded dates of death, most family members were **murdered during the Holocaust**—a total of approximately **140 people**.



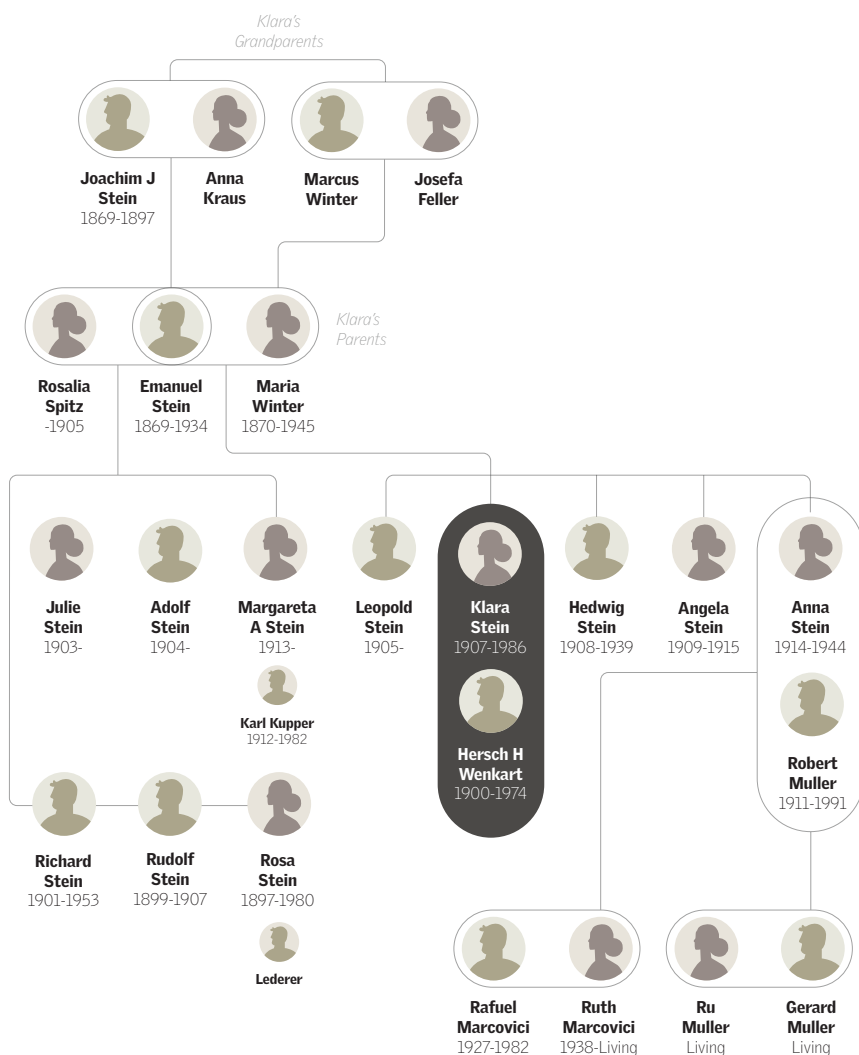
Family Tree of the WENKART Family

*The family originates from **Ukraine**. Notably, many **young children** passed away at an early age.*



Family Tree of the STEIN Family.

*The family comes from Horn in **Lower Austria**. Both the grandmother, the mother Anna, her sister Hedwig, and her child were murdered in the Holocaust. Only my mother and her father (whom she never saw again) survived the war.*



LABOUR CAMP DEBLIN

ca. 1:1000

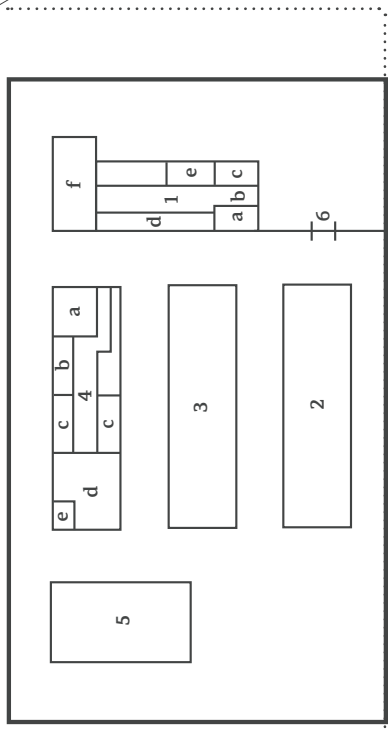
Construction
Management
Air Force

↖ the Vistula River

↗ the Stalag

RAILWAY LINE

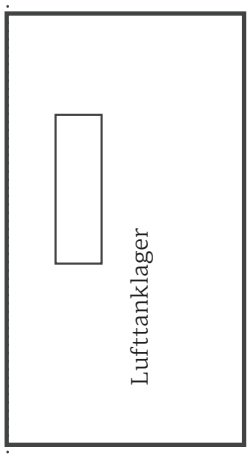
ROAD TO THE RAILWAY STATION



T H E R O A D T O H O R S T

- 1. Camp guide's barracks
 - a) Living Space
 - b) Going to the Bathroom
 - c) Magazine
 - d) Women's bedroom
 - e) Magazine
 - f) Bath & Disinfection
- 2. Team barracks
- 3. Crew barracks

- 4. Children's barracks
 - a) Law Firm
 - b) Doctor
 - c) Precinct
 - d) Meeting Room
 - e) Author's Living Space
- 5. Family Barracks
- 6. Warehouse Entrance



In recent years, numerous publications have been published that deal with the history of Jews in Deblin and, in detail, with the role of Herrmann Wenkart.

For additional context, I have taken the liberty of adding these to the book.

This text comes from the Journal of Holocaust Research, which is published in Haifa, Israel. It examines the events of the Deblin camp.

<https://holocaustjournal.haifa.ac.il>

Historical Background

In 1939, after the German occupation of Poland, the General Government was established under the leadership of Hans Frank. This territory was divided into four administrative districts, including Lublin. The Puławy region, where the Dęblin-Irena camp was located, had about 26,000 Jewish inhabitants before the war, spread across 14 towns.

Immediately after the occupation, the Jewish residents were forced into labor, often through brutal street raids in which people were captured and compelled to perform work that usually had no productive function but was primarily intended to humiliate them.

The Puławy district became a center of forced labor for its Jewish population. Following Hans Frank's decree in October 1939, which mandated forced labor for all Jews aged 16 to 60, the Jewish Councils (Judenräte) took on the task of providing workers. They organized labor forces for various activities, including agricultural work and private businesses that profited from the exploitation of cheap Jewish labor.

Forced Labor and Extermination in the Puławy District

In 1939, after the German occupation of Poland, the so-called General Government was established under the leadership of Hans Frank. The territory was divided into four administrative districts: Warsaw, Radom, Kraków, and Lublin. The Lublin district was further subdivided into ten administrative units, including the Puławy district. Before the war, approximately 26,000 Jews lived in this district, spread across 14 towns and villages.

With the German occupation, Jewish residents were immediately subjected to forced labor, often through brutal and violent street arrests. The Jewish Councils (Judenräte) attempted to regulate these arbitrary arrests by negotiating with the German occupation authorities to organize the forced labor system. Initially, the tasks assigned were of little significance, such as street cleaning, digging, or carrying water. These tasks primarily served to exhaust the Jews both morally and physically.

With the decree of October 26, 1939, which mandated forced labor for all Jews between the ages of 16 and 60, the work became increasingly systematic and targeted. Jewish laborers were employed in agricultural enterprises, private businesses, and sometimes directly for the SS. Particularly in the years 1942–1943, the exploitation of Jewish labor became an important economic resource for the German occupation forces.

The Camp at Deblin-Irena Airfield

From 1942 to 1944, a forced labor camp was established at the Dęblin-Irena airfield, operating until the end of the German occupation in July 1944. This camp was one of the last to remain in operation until the end of the war, distinguishing it from other forced labor camps in the region, which were already dissolved in 1943. The conditions in the camp and the interactions between the Jewish workers and the German overseers are central themes of this chapter. Despite the harsh conditions, hundreds of Jews survived in this camp, in contrast to other camps in the region, from which only a few survived.

The camp at the airfield was unique because it was controlled by the German Air Force (Luftwaffe), and the Jewish workers were primarily responsible for the construction and maintenance of airfields. This work was considered crucial for the war effort, which may have been a factor in the survival of many Jewish laborers.

This chapter examines the conditions of forced labor and the impact of relationships between Jews and their oppressors on survival during this difficult time.

Chapter 3: The Camp Administration in Deblin-Irena

The forced labor camp at the Dęblin-Irena airfield was characterized by its internal organization and leadership structures, which were largely managed by Jewish prisoners themselves. A particularly important figure was Hermann Wenkart, who served as the Lagerältester (camp elder). Wenkart, an Austrian of Jewish origin, was deported to Opole in 1941 and later played a central role in the administration of the Dęblin-Irena camp.

Wenkart was a former lawyer and had a good relationship with certain German officers, including one whose life he had saved during World War I. Thanks to these connections, he was promoted to leadership positions, allowing him to oversee the distribution of food and medicine and arrange for wages to be paid to workers. These responsibilities enabled him to maintain some level of control over the lives of the prisoners.

Internal Administration of the Camp

In addition to Wenkart, other Jewish inmates also played key roles in the camp's administration. There was a Jewish police force, primarily composed of young men, responsible for maintaining order within the camp. Many of these men were regarded as ruthless and brutal in their treatment of fellow prisoners. Some reports emphasize that these Jewish policemen worked closely with Wenkart and used their influence to gain privileges.

Wenkart's wife was also involved in the camp's administration and managed the camp kitchen. This role provided certain advantages for her and her family, as kitchen work was considered less physically demanding.

Criticism of Wenkart

Although Wenkart helped many survive in the camp, his role was controversial. Some inmates harshly criticized him, accusing him of collaborating with the Germans and making decisions that endangered the lives of fellow prisoners. Particularly in relation to the deportations, he was accused of not doing everything in his power to save more people.

A key accusation was that on October 15, 1942, during the liquidation of the Dęblin-Irena ghetto, Wenkart allegedly prevented some Jews from entering the camp, which ultimately led to their deaths. Such incidents created tensions between Wenkart and other Jewish inmates.

Despite this criticism, Wenkart remained an influential figure in the camp, closely cooperating with the German leadership. However, it is emphasized that he often faced moral dilemmas, having to make decisions that affected either a smaller or a larger group of people.

Chapter 3: The Camp

Administration

in Deblin-Irena

The living conditions in the Dęblin-Irena forced labor camp were extremely harsh, as in most Nazi labor camps. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire and divided into five zones, each with different functions: there were living quarters for men and women, a section for children, as well as functional buildings such as warehouses and a bathhouse. Hygiene conditions in the camp were extremely poor, and diseases such as typhus and dysentery were widespread.

Work in the Camp

The prisoners were forced to work under extremely difficult conditions. The workday began early in the morning and typically lasted 12 hours. The Jewish inmates were primarily tasked with the construction and maintenance of the nearby airfield. Their duties included building runways and other construction work deemed essential for the war effort by the German Air Force (Luftwaffe).

Nutrition and Living Conditions

Food in the camp was inadequate. The prisoners received barely enough to sustain themselves through the grueling physical labor. While food rations were occasionally distributed, they were often insufficient. Due to the lack of nutrition and the harsh working conditions, the health of the inmates deteriorated rapidly. Many suffered from malnutrition and physical weakness, which further affected their ability to work.

Despite the poor living conditions, the inmates tried to maintain a sense of normalcy. There were educational and religious activities in the camp, and prisoners supported one another as best they could. These social and cultural activities helped them sustain their will to survive, even as they constantly faced the threat of deportation and death.

Chapter 5: Survival Strategies in the Deblin-Irena Camp

In the Dęblin-Irena forced labor camp, Jewish prisoners developed a variety of strategies to survive under extremely harsh conditions. Despite the daily threats of violence, malnutrition, and grueling labor, many inmates found ways to maintain their physical and mental well-being.

Physical Survival Strategies

particularly with the camp leader, Hermann Wenkart. Wenkart played an ambivalent role in the camp: while some prisoners criticized him for collaborating too closely with the Germans, others acknowledged that his connections with German officers helped secure better living conditions for the inmates. Thanks to these relationships, prisoners in Dęblin-Irena received relatively better food and clothing compared to other camps. Additionally, Wenkart attempted to procure coal for heating through bribery, helping protect prisoners from the harsh winter conditions.

Furthermore, prisoners relied on mutual support and solidarity to survive physically. Work was often distributed among them, with stronger individuals assisting the weaker ones. This collaboration helped many endure the daily hardships.

Psychological Survival Strategies

In addition to physical strategies, inmates also developed psychological methods to cope with the constant fear and uncertainty. Religious and cultural activities played a significant role in camp life. Despite the dire circumstances, prisoners continued to hold religious services and celebrate Jewish holidays. These activities provided a sense of normalcy and unity.

Educational activities were also organized to provide intellectual stimulation. This not only strengthened the prisoners' will to survive but also offered a means of escaping the daily brutality by focusing on learning.

Escape Attempts

Some prisoners attempted to escape the realities of the camp by fleeing. However, escape attempts were extremely dangerous, and many who tried were captured and executed. Nevertheless, some inmates took the risk, especially in the final years of the war when German control weakened and the front lines drew closer.

Conclusion

The survival strategies in the Dęblin-Irena camp were diverse and reflected the resilience and adaptability of the Jewish prisoners. Despite the constant threats of violence and death, many found ways to endure both physically and mentally. The role of Hermann Wenkart and other camp officials remained controversial, but their ability to negotiate better living conditions played a crucial role in the survival of many inmates in the camp.

Chapter 6: Cooperation and Conflicts in the Deblin-Irena Camp

The relationship between Jewish prisoners and their German overseers in the Deblin-Irena camp was marked by constant tension but also by instances of cooperation. Many inmates had to interact with their German overseers to improve their chances of survival, which often led to moral dilemmas.

Collaboration and Moral Dilemmas

Hermann Wenkart, the camp elder, played a particularly controversial role. He closely cooperated with German officers and attempted to improve camp conditions through negotiations and bribery. This allowed him to secure better living conditions for some prisoners, though often at the expense of others. While some inmates saw his actions as necessary for survival, others accused him of supporting the Germans and betraying fellow Jewish prisoners.

Jewish inmates involved in administrative roles within the camp, such as the Jewish police, were also heavily criticized. Many prisoners viewed them as particularly brutal and ruthless. Some of these policemen abused their power to gain personal advantages, further deepening the divisions within the camp.

Social Tensions Among Prisoners

In addition to conflicts with the overseers, there were also significant tensions among the Jewish inmates themselves. The camp housed different groups, including local Jews from the region and Jewish refugees from Slovakia. These groups often found themselves in competition, particularly over scarce resources like food and clothing.

The Slovakian Jews formed a particularly close-knit community and showed strong solidarity with one another. They also received aid from outside the camp in the form of relief packages sent by Jewish organizations in Slovakia. However, this support intensified tensions with Polish Jews in the camp, who had no access to similar aid and often saw the Slovakian group as privileged.

Conclusion

Life in the Dęblin-Irena camp was shaped by a complex web of cooperation and conflict. While some prisoners sought to improve their survival chances through collaboration with the Germans, this often deepened tensions with other inmates, who were locked in a constant struggle for limited resources. Hermann Wenkart's role remained particularly controversial, as not all saw his efforts to ensure survival in the camp as morally justified.

Chapter 7: The Dissolution of the Dęblin-Irena Camp

The Dęblin-Irena camp was dissolved in 1944 as the German army was forced to retreat due to the advancing Soviet forces. The dissolution occurred in several phases, beginning in May 1944, when the first groups of prisoners were deported to other camps.

Escape Attempts and Resistance

During the camp's dissolution, there were several escape attempts. Some prisoners tried to flee into the nearby forests, hoping to join partisan groups or simply to survive. However, many of these escape attempts ended in tragedy, as most fugitives were either captured by German guards or killed by local militias. Nevertheless, a small number of prisoners managed to escape successfully and went into hiding.

The Final Evacuation

In July 1944, as the front line drew closer, the camp was completely evacuated. The remaining prisoners were loaded onto trains and deported to other concentration camps, including Częstochowa and Auschwitz. These deportations marked the end of the Dęblin-Irena camp. Many of the prisoners who were sent to these camps did not survive the following months, as they were either murdered in the gas chambers or perished under the catastrophic conditions of the war's final phase.

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Dęblin-Irena camp was part of the broader retreat of the German army from occupied territories in Eastern Europe. Despite some prisoners' efforts to escape or resist deportation, the fate of most inmates ended in tragedy. Only a small group survived the final phase of the war—either by fleeing or by enduring the harsh conditions of the concentration camps.

Chapter 8: Post-War Period and Memories

After the end of World War II, the survivors of the Dęblin-Irena camp began to process their experiences and share them with the world. This chapter focuses on the memories of the survivors and their efforts to preserve the history of the camp and the forced labor at the Dęblin airfield.

Returning Home

Many survivors returned to their hometowns after the war, only to find that their world had been completely transformed. The Jewish population in Poland had been almost entirely wiped out by the Holocaust, and those who returned often found no surviving relatives. Their homes had been destroyed or taken over by others, leaving them with the difficult task of rebuilding their lives.

The Role of Memories

The memories of the survivors played a crucial role in coping with their traumatic experiences. Many survivors published memoirs detailing their time in the camp and their forced labor experiences. These accounts remain invaluable in documenting the scale of the atrocities committed against Jews in Poland.

Commemorations and Memorials

Over the years, several commemorative events have been held to honor the victims of the Dęblin-Irena camp. Memorials have been erected at various locations, including former forced labor camp sites. These memorials serve not only as places of remembrance but also as a warning to future generations to never forget the horrors of the Holocaust.

Conclusion

This final chapter highlights the importance of remembrance after the Holocaust and the survivors' efforts to pass on their experiences. These memories are an essential part of Holocaust history and help ensure that the victims are never forgotten.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and Outlook

This chapter summarizes the key insights from the history of the Dęblin-Irena forced labor camp and provides an outlook on its historical significance within the context of the Holocaust.

The Significance of the Dęblin-Irena Camp

The Dęblin-Irena forced labor camp was one of many camps established during World War II to exploit the Jewish population in Poland. Its particular significance lies in the fact that it remained operational until shortly before the end of the German occupation, playing a central role in the German labor program—especially in supporting the war effort through the construction and maintenance of the Dęblin airfield.

Survival Through Forced Labor

Many Jewish prisoners in the Dęblin-Irena camp survived the Holocaust due to the strategic importance of the airfield. Forced labor in the aviation industry was considered vital by the German authorities, which extended the camp's operation and, consequently, the survival of its inmates. This explains why some prisoners had a better chance of survival compared to those in other camps.

Collaboration and Resistance

The ambiguous role of individuals like Hermann Wenkart, the camp elder, remains a controversial topic. On one hand, his negotiations with German officers helped secure the survival of many prisoners; on the other hand, these collaborations were often morally questioned. The experiences in the Dęblin-Irena camp highlight the difficult choices Jewish inmates had to make in order to survive.

Outlook

The history of the Dęblin-Irena camp serves as a powerful example of the brutal exploitation and resistance of the Jewish population during the Holocaust. It underscores the necessity of preserving and sharing such stories to keep the memory of the victims alive and to ensure that such atrocities never happen again.

With these conclusions, the study of events at the Dęblin-Irena camp comes to an end, but the lessons learned from it remain relevant for understanding humanity, morality, and survival in extreme conditions.

Bombing of the Dęblin Airfield on September 3, 1939

Aerial photograph: Irena (top) – the ghetto was located in a semicircle – the airfield (right) and military facilities (left).

Before World War II, thousands of Jews lived in the towns of Dęblin and Irena [pl][a] in central Poland; Irena had been home to the Polish Air Force Academy since 1927. In September 1939, the town was captured during the German invasion of Poland, and the persecution of Jews began with forced recruitment for forced labor and the establishment of a Judenrat ("Jewish Council").

In November 1940, a ghetto was established in Irena, initially consisting of six streets. It was an open ghetto (Jews were not allowed to leave without permission, but non-Jews were permitted to enter). Many ghetto residents worked on labor projects for the Dęblin Fortress (a German Army base), the railway, and the Luftwaffe.

From May 1941, Jews from the ghettos of Opole and Warsaw were sent to labor camps around Dęblin. Conditions in the ghetto worsened at the end of 1941 due to increasing German restrictions and epidemics of typhus and dysentery.

The first deportation took place on May 6, 1942, sending about 2,500 Jews to the Sobibór extermination camp. A week later, two thousand Jews from Slovakia and hundreds more from nearby liquidated ghettos arrived.[b] In October of the same year, the Irena Ghetto was liquidated; about 2,500 Jews were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp, while about 1,400 Jews were kept in forced labor camps in the town.

Unusually, the labor camp operated by the Luftwaffe—holding around a thousand Jews at its peak—remained in existence until July 22, 1944, less than a week before the Red Army took over the region. As one of the last Jewish labor camps in the Lublin district, it allowed hundreds of Jews to survive the Holocaust.

Some survivors who returned to their homes were met with hostility, and several were murdered; all had left the region by 1947.

Background

Jews in Dęblin welcomed Polish Marshal Józef Piłsudski after the capture of Dęblin during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920.

Dęblin and Irena [pl][a] (Yiddish: מאדזשיץ, Modzhitz) are located 70 kilometers northwest of Lublin, Poland, at the confluence of the Vistula and Wieprz rivers and at an important junction of the Lublin–Warsaw railway line.

Local Jews supported the January Uprising of 1863. By the late 19th century, the area had become a center of Hasidism; most Jews followed the Modzitz dynasty, named after the town of Irena. There were also Gur Hasidim. The Modzitz Rebbe, Yisrael Taub, settled in the town in 1889.

Other Jews were Bundists or Zionists. Many earned their livelihoods as peddlers, shopkeepers, or craftsmen (especially in leather and metalworking) and later contributed to the town's development as a summer resort.

In 1927, the civilian population of Dęblin and Irena was 4,860, including 3,060 Jews. From 1927, Dęblin was home to the Polish Air Force Academy, whose airfield was one of the largest in Poland.

German Invasion

During the German invasion of Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II in Europe, the Luftwaffe bombed Dęblin between September 2 and 7, 1939, targeting the military airfield, Polish Army ammunition depots, and a nearby bridge over the Vistula River. Most Polish soldiers left the city on September 7; on September 11, the remaining Polish forces blew up the ammunition storage facilities and withdrew. The German army arrived on either September 12 or 20. Many residents, both Jews and other locals, had fled the air raids. In the following weeks, most returned under German pressure. The Jews found that their homes had been looted. They were forced into labor groups to clear bomb damage and repair some buildings. Additionally, the Jewish community was fined 20,000 złoty.

During the German occupation, Dęblin and Irena became part of the Lublin District in the General Government. By the end of 1939, Jews were required to wear armbands with the Star of David, and some were forcibly sent to labor camps in Janiszów, Bełżec, and Pawłowice.

Later that year, the German occupiers forced the Jews to establish a Judenrat (Jewish Council) to mediate between the Jewish community and German demands. The Judenrat in Dęblin was formed later than in other regions and had its office on Bankowa Street. Its first members tried to mitigate the impact of German demands and warn residents about searches. The first chairman, Leizer Teichman, was dismissed in early 1941; reports suggest that he and his secretary, along with their families, were deported to Wąwolnica after attempting to bribe police officers. The Judenrat was temporarily led by Kalman Fris, who resigned after a few months. In August, he was replaced by Vevel Shulman, and in September 1941, by a man named Drayfish from Konin.

The Ghetto

In November 1940 or early 1941, a Nazi ghetto was established in Irena on the orders of Kurt Lenk, the region's new land commissioner. Some Jews were forced to leave their homes and move into the ghetto. The likely motive was to keep Jews away from two nearby military facilities: a Luftwaffe airfield and a German army base filled with troops preparing for the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. The official decree for the ghetto's establishment was issued only in 1942.

Until 1942, Irena was an open ghetto (there was no physical fence, but leaving without permission was punishable by death), consisting of six streets. Its boundaries included Okólna Street, the Irenka River, Bankowa Street, and Staromiejska Street. In September 1942, Staromiejska Street was removed from the ghetto, and its residents were relocated to Bankowa Street. Initially, non-Jews were allowed to enter the ghetto and even live there, allowing many Jews to survive by bartering goods for food. A secular Polish-language school, led by Aida Milgrojlm-Citronbojm, educated 70 to 100 students.

The Jewish ghetto police maintained order inside the ghetto, while outside it was guarded by a special service unit made up of Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans) and Ukrainian auxiliary police. This unit was notorious for beating, humiliating, and killing ghetto residents.

By late 1941, non-Jews were prohibited from entering the ghetto, leading to an increase in waste and epidemics of typhus and dysentery. The sick were treated in a 30-bed hospital run by Isaar Kawa, a doctor from Konin. With the help of non-Jewish doctors, medicine was smuggled in from Warsaw. At the same time, the Germans tightened restrictions: the use of ovens was banned, winter clothing was confiscated, and fuel imports were prohibited.

More Jews began leaving the ghetto in search of essentials, leading to the execution of twenty young women who were caught outside. Due to relatively better conditions in the Lublin District compared to Warsaw, some Jews fled to towns like Irena, but twenty unregistered Jewish refugees were executed.

Forced Labor

Until the end of 1942, Jews received wages for forced labor, except for those recruited by the city administration for tasks such as street cleaning and snow removal. Some Jews worked for German companies like Schwartz and Hochtief, which were contracted by the Wehrmacht for construction work at military bases in the city.

The Eastern Railway (Ostbahn) hired Schultz to upgrade the Lublin–Warsaw rail line, a project that employed 300 Jews starting in June 1941. Working conditions on this site were extremely harsh, with Jews forced to work twelve-hour days.

Most Jews, however, worked for the German army or the Luftwaffe; women and children grew food for the military. At the Dęblin Fortress, which had been taken over by the German army and where about 200 Jews from the ghetto worked, Stalag 307 was established on July 10, 1941—a prisoner-of-war camp for Soviet soldiers. Approximately 80,000 Soviet prisoners were held there, all of whom died within months due to starvation and disease. The Jews working there witnessed that the prisoners endured even worse conditions than they did.

The Jews from Dęblin and Irena sought the best labor assignments; 200 of the Slovak deportees eventually worked for the city administration. Another 200 Slovaks later worked for Schultz after the company expanded its operations. Survivors reported that the German soldiers overseeing the forced laborers treated them relatively well, while some Polish supervisors beat the Jewish workers. The Ukrainian guards at the railway construction site were particularly brutal, frequently threatening workers with death.

In May 1941, in preparation for the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Luftwaffe contracted the Autheried company to expand the airfield. They recruited 200 Jewish workers from Opole, many of whom were Austrian Jews deported from Vienna in February 1941 who had sought

to escape the harsh conditions in Opole. These Jews, along with 400 others recruited in Irena and at the Lipowa 7 camp in Lublin, as well as 500 Polish workers, worked twelve-hour shifts leveling runways, building roads, walls, air-raid shelters, and earth fortifications. They also constructed a barbed-wire-enclosed area near the runway for craftsmen.

After the project was completed in October, the workers were reassigned to various construction sites in the city, possibly related to a typhus epidemic. Some of the Jews from Vienna remained at the airfield because they had obtained work permits to help transport gravel and build fuel tanks. These workers formed the core of the later labor camp.

After the first deportation from the Irena ghetto on May 6, 1942, additional Jews sought work permits—often through bribery—to avoid deportation. By October 1942, the camp had 543 registered residents.

At that time, there were five forced labor camps around Dęblin: the Luftwaffe camp, the fortress, the railway station (with 300 Jews), the Lipowa Street camp (with 200 Jews and ethnic Poles), and another near the city limits with 300 Jews.

Deportation, Murder, and Liquidation

First Deportation

The first deportation took place on May 6, 1942, to make room for Slovak deportees who arrived a week later. A unit consisting of German and Ukrainian police, along with some German SS and Ukrainian SS auxiliary troops, ordered the Jews to assemble at the main square at 9:00 AM. According to Yad Vashem, the Blue Police (Polish police under German control) also participated in the action.

Probably because the Luftwaffe was trying to recruit more forced laborers, the Jews were forced to wait for five hours. At 2:00 PM, 1,000 Jews who already had work permits were separated, and local employers began selecting an additional 200–500 Jews. Around 40 or 50 people were killed while trying to join the labor group. Around 2,300 to 2,500 Jews from Dęblin—mainly elderly people and families with young children—were marched approximately 2.5 kilometers to the Dęblin train station at 6:00 PM and deported to the Sobibór extermination camp. The victims were beaten, and those who could not keep up the pace were shot. Only late at night were the Jews who had been assigned to labor allowed to return home. Every family was affected. After the deportation, the bodies of the dead were collected in the synagogue and transported out of the ghetto in carts.

Over the next two days, more than 4,000 Jews from the northern Puławy district were deported—200 from Bobrowniki (May 6), 1,800 from Ryki (May 7), 125 from Stężyca (May 7), 1,500 from Baranów (May 8), and 500 from Łysobyki (May 8)—and sent to Sobibór. This was part of a nationwide extermination operation in the Puławy district, the first in a series of systematic deportations in the Lublin district as part of “Operation Reinhard.” The district administrator, Alfred Brandt, ordered the operation shortly after Sobibór became operational; he was present during the Dęblin deportation.

Second Deportation

The next deportation, coinciding with the liquidation of the last two remaining ghettos in Puławy (Opole and Końskowola), took place on October 15, 1942. The day before, all laborers were ordered to remain at their workplaces. Under the command of SS-Obersturmführer Grossman, the remaining Jews were rounded up by gendarmes, Luftwaffe soldiers, and auxiliary police. Many Jews attempted to escape the roundup and reach the Luftwaffe labor camp, which at that time housed 543 registered residents. Some were turned away by the camp’s Jewish police. Israeli historian Talia Farkash estimates that around 500 Jews, including 60–90 young children, managed to enter the camp, mostly through bribery. Historian David Silberklang estimates that about 1,000 Jews entered the camp, including 280 women and 100 children.

Many of the Slovak Jews, unaware of what awaited them, remained in the ghetto while gathering their belongings. Between 215 and 500 Jews were shot by the Ukrainians and Germans while their homes were being cleared. Between 2,000 and 2,500 people—mostly Slovaks—were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. Members of the Judenrat, the Jewish police, and their families—totaling around 100 people—were kept behind to clean up the ghetto. Possibly another 100 Jews remained hidden in the ghetto without permission. On October 28, the remaining Jews were sent to the Schultz forced labor camp, and the ghetto was officially liquidated. Either on that day or in the following weeks, 1,000 people from the labor camps were removed, including 200 workers from the Dęblin fortress and 200 to

500 Luftwaffe workers. They were deported to Końskowola or Treblinka.

After this deportation, Farkash estimates that about 1,400 Jews remained in the labor camps around Irena. Estimates suggest that 1,000 to 2,000 were in the Luftwaffe camp, another 300 in a camp near the train station, and 120 in another camp near the railway loading dock. In May or July 1943, most of the remaining prisoners in the railway camps were deported to the Poniatowa concentration camp; the rest were deported by the end of 1943. Hundreds of Jews were still living in the remaining labor camps in the Puławy district, but they were murdered during “Operation Harvest Festival” (November 2–3, 1943). This operation also killed the prisoners of Poniatowa but did not affect the Jews in the Luftwaffe camp in Irena, who were unaware of it. After “Operation Harvest Festival,” ten labor camps remained in the Lublin district, with more than 10,000 Jews still alive.

Luftwaffe Camp

Camp Leader

The senior prisoner (Lagerältester) at the Luftwaffe camp was Hermann Wenkert, a Jewish lawyer from Vienna who was deported to Opole in 1941 and later arrived in Irena with a group of volunteers. According to Wenkert's account, soon after his arrival, he encountered Eduard Bromofsky, an Austrian Luftwaffe officer with whom he had served during World War I. Bromofsky convinced the camp commander to promote Wenkert. Even after Bromofsky was transferred, Wenkert retained his position due to his good relations with the German authorities.

Wenkert staffed the camp administration with other Viennese Jews, secured extra rations for himself and his family, and arranged for his family to be transferred from Opole to Irena. Due to his close ties with the German authorities and his use of his position for personal gain, some survivors viewed him as a collaborator. Whenever possible, Wenkert negotiated with the authorities and paid bribes to avoid punishments. In cases unknown to the Germans, he consulted respected prisoners. However, when he believed he had no other choice and the survival of the camp was at stake, Wenkert handed over Jews accused of offenses to the Germans, knowing that this meant their deaths. German-speaking Jews had a more favorable opinion of him than local Yiddish-speaking Jews. According to historian David Silberklang, both perspectives on Wenkert might be true: he sought personal advantages but also worked to keep other Jewish prisoners alive.

Conditions

Compared to other camps, conditions in the Luftwaffe camp were relatively good. Prisoners received food rations of about 1,700 calories per day (enough for survival), had access to weekly baths and medical care, and were allowed to practice their religion. The presence of 100 young children—justified by the claim that they increased their parents' productivity—was particularly unusual and was not seen in any other camp in the Lublin district after Aktion Erntefest (Operation Harvest Festival). Aida Milgroyjm-Citronbojm continued running the Polish-language school she had established in the ghetto within the camp. The SS, unaware of the children's presence, conducted regular unannounced inspections, during which the children had to be hidden. According to historian Talia Farkash, Wenkert's good relationship with the camp administration partly contributed to the relatively favorable conditions.

Wenkert managed to exempt religious Jews from working on the Sabbath and allowed the establishment of a Chevra Kadisha (burial society) to ensure that the dead were buried according to Jewish law. In 1943, about 80 Jews, including Wenkert, received kosher food for Passover.

The camp had three German commanders, all with the rank of Feldwebel (sergeant): Kattengel (until March 1943), Dusy, and Rademacher (during the last two months). While Kattengel was viewed with suspicion by prisoners because he patrolled with a dog and a whip, Dusy and Rademacher were described positively by survivors. Dusy even arranged for a woman to receive treatment at a German hospital after she was severely injured. Wiszniewski, a local ethnic German (Volksdeutscher), was the lead foreman overseeing Jewish workers and was not known for mistreating them. Autheried engineer Kozak provided food to the Jews he worked with.

The Slovak Jews in the camp were the last large surviving group of the nearly 40,000 Slovak Jews deported to the Lublin district in 1942. Jews remaining in Prešov hired couriers (non-Jews from the Polish-Slovak border region) to regularly bring letters and valuables

into the camp. A committee was formed within the camp to distribute these goods among the Slovak Jews. However, cases of theft by Polish Jews led to tensions between the two groups.

Despite the relatively good conditions, some Jews attempted to escape, fearing the camp would be liquidated. The Luftwaffe camp administration imposed collective punishments to deter escapes. Both theft and possession of foreign currency were punishable by hanging. Punishments could be excessive and arbitrary—nine Jews were executed by a firing squad for accidentally starting a fire—but overall, conditions were less brutal than in other Nazi camps.

Liquidation

The camp was dissolved on July 22, 1944, the same day the Red Army reached Lublin. At the time of the deportation, about 800 to 900 Jews remained in the camp, including 400 to 600 from Dęblin or Irena, 40 from Vienna, and 70 to 80 from Slovakia. Two or three transports left Irena on July 17 and 22 (Silberklang mentions a third on July 20).

Since no one volunteered, the first transport consisted of about 200 people who had few connections in the camp, including single adults and fifteen children between the ages of three and six. On the orders of the camp's security officer, Georg Bartenschlager, the fifteen children were shot upon arrival in Częstochowa. The remaining prisoners, including Wenkert and 33 young children, left with the second transport alongside the German camp commander, Rademacher, who carried a letter of protection from the airfield commander.

Escape and Deportation

Around fifty Jews managed to escape during the camp's evacuation, but most of them were killed. The second transport arrived in Częstochowa on July 25; the young children were separated for two and a half days but were not killed. The reason for this remains unclear, though it was likely due to negotiations with Bartenschlager.

In Częstochowa, the Jews worked in the four Hugo Schneider AG (HASAG) factories. Some were deported to Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen in January 1945, while others were liberated by the Red Army. About half of them survived.

A Unique Case in Nazi-Occupied Poland

According to historian Talia Farkash, the Luftwaffe camp at the Irena airfield was a “singular case” in the Lublin district and possibly in all of Nazi-occupied Poland. One unusual aspect of the camp was that it was operated by the Luftwaffe from beginning to end, rather than the SS, despite the SS attempting to expand its control in 1943 and 1944. According to David Silberklang, the fact that the Wehrmacht, rather than the SS, ran the camp played a crucial role in its continued existence. However, other Luftwaffe-run camps, such as three in the Zamość district, were liquidated before the end of 1943.

Another reason for the camp’s survival was the importance of Jewish labor for the German war effort in Dęblin, a point that Wenkert repeatedly emphasized in his negotiations with the Germans. Overall, luck also played a significant role, along with the combination of Jewish leadership, relatively lenient German overseers, and the evacuation of the camp to Częstochowa instead of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

While 99% of the Jews from the Lublin district were murdered in the Holocaust, hundreds from Dęblin and Irena survived the war.

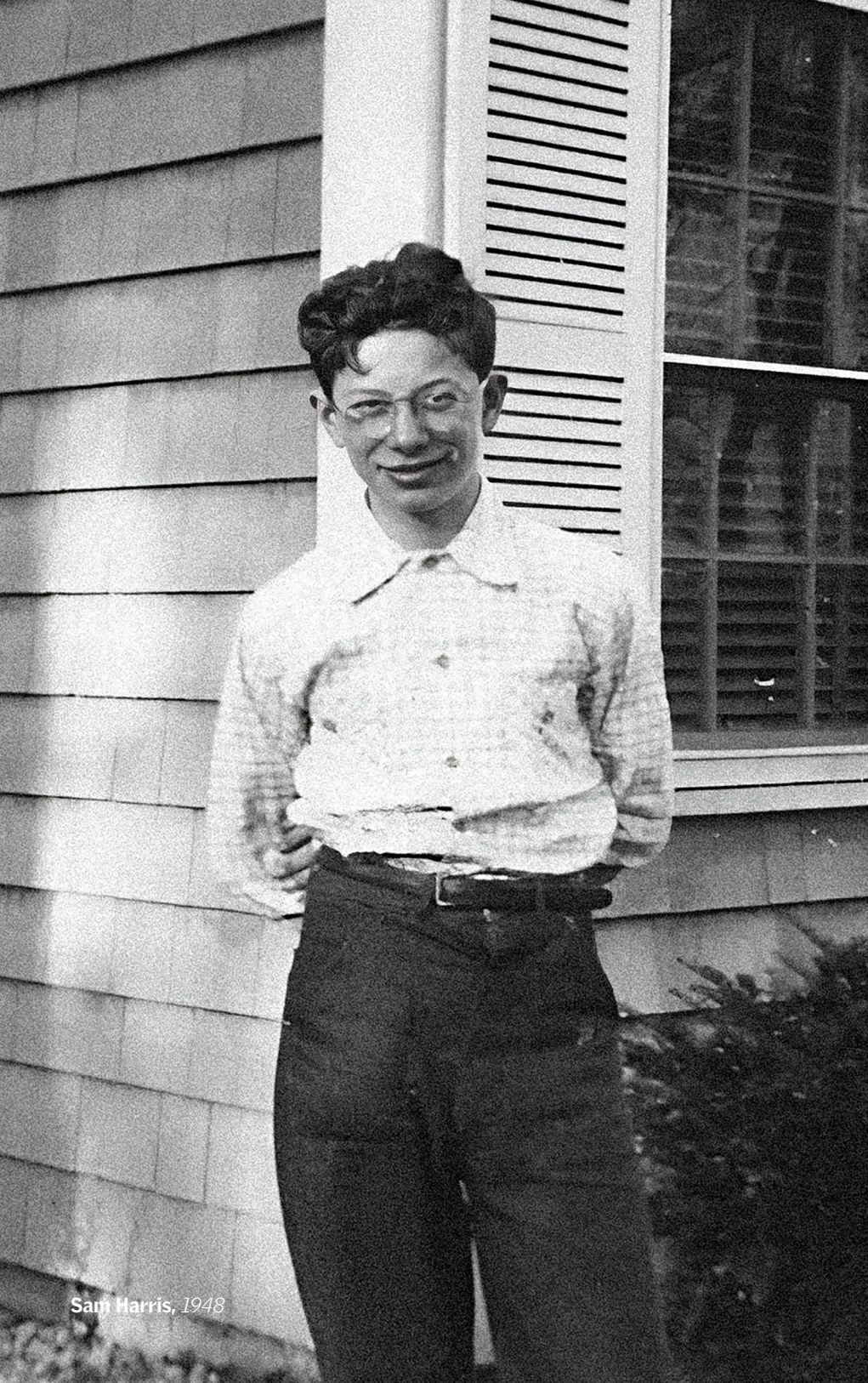
Post-War Period

Dęblin was liberated by the 1st Polish Army on July 27, 1944. In 1945, Alfred Brandt was convicted of his crimes by a Soviet military tribunal near Słupsk and executed by firing squad.

Some Jewish survivors who attempted to return home in January 1945 were warned by the local chief of the *Milicja Obywatelska* (People’s Militia) that settling in the town was illegal. In March 1945, the surviving Luksemburg sisters—Łaja, Gitla, and Fryda—were murdered with the involvement of local policemen. Other Jews received threatening letters.

Following the Kielce Pogrom in 1946, a memorial gathering was held in Dęblin to honor the victims, but local residents disrupted the event with antisemitic slogans. By 1947, the last remaining Jew had left the town, and as of the 21st century, no Jewish community remains there. In 2011, the former synagogue in Dęblin was in a state of disrepair and was under discussion for demolition. In 2015, a memorial plaque was unveiled in Dęblin to commemorate the Irena Ghetto.

Ignaz Bubis, a former prisoner of the ghetto, served as chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany from 1992 to 1999.



Sam Harris, 1948

SAM HARRIS

Sam Harris lost his childhood due to Holocaust. He ensures that a new generation of young people can thrive.

Sam Harris is passionate about this cause. Despite being 88 years old and using a walker, he will personally greet you at the somber, industrial entrance of the museum he helped create—an institution that ensures the horrific yet essential history he lived through will continue to be told, even long after he is gone, and his voice, one of the last direct eyewitness accounts, has fallen silent.

But this was not always the case.

For many years, Harris—a former insurance professional and a member of the Northbrook, Illinois Rotary Club—refused to speak about how the Nazis had taken him away as a little boy. He did not want to talk about the unbearable hunger, the fear, the machine guns, his murdered parents, the cattle cars, or the concentration camps. To him, it was an old story, a distant past. Why bring it up? He was an American now. First, an American boy growing up in Northbrook, a comfortable suburb north of Chicago. Then, an American man who could choose what he wanted to talk about—or what he preferred to keep to himself.

His silence lasted for many years. *“I knew it weighed on him, that he was keeping it all inside,”* says his wife, Dede, to whom he has been married for 62 years. *“He just never talked about his past. I could see it boiling inside him.”*

His reluctance was complicated. He did not want people to pity him. And if he was successful, he wanted it to be because of who he was, not because of what had happened to him. Sitting in a chair in the small but well-stocked library of his museum, he explains how, when someone noticed his accent and asked where he was from, he would turn the question back on them: *"Where do you think I'm from?"* If they answered *"New York,"* he would reply, *"Yes, exactly! New York."* If they guessed *"Germany,"* he would say, *"Germany, yes, how did you figure that out?"* and smile.

His wife, Dede, a trained social worker, finally sat down with him one evening by a crackling fire. *"I asked him to tell me his story,"* she recalls. *"It seemed to break through the barrier. Once he said it out loud, he was able to open up to others."*

It started slowly. In 1977, at a meeting of the Wilmette, Illinois Rotary Club, Harris met a fellow member, Rabbi William Frankel, who had grown up in Vienna. Like Harris, Frankel had fled from the Nazis, but he had turned his past into a platform for activism. He had marched with Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. during the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s and played a significant role in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation. He befriended Harris and convinced him that he owed it to future generations to share his story.

At the same time, some neo-Nazis were planning a demonstration in Skokie, a Chicago suburb with a large Jewish population, including many Holocaust survivors. Although a lengthy legal battle ultimately prevented the march, activists like Rabbi Frankel believed that silence and inaction were no longer options. Hoping that evil would simply fade away had never been a wise strategy.

Around that time, Arthur Butz, an associate professor of electrical engineering at Northwestern University in Evanston—just ten miles from Harris's home—published a book claiming the Holocaust was a myth perpetuated by the Allies and Zionists. Frankel called Harris, outraged by the book. *"Sam, I know this is hard for you, but it's time for you to speak up,"* Frankel urged.

In Frankel's basement, the rabbi interviewed Harris on camera. *"And that was the first time I was really able to speak,"* Harris says. *"I told myself: I will never do this again. But then he showed the video to everyone in the community. The room was full. Then he passed it on to other rabbis. It all happened because of Rotary."*

More than 30 years after the events, Harris finally began to talk about his once-unspeakable past.

"I asked him to tell me his story. It seemed to break through the barrier. Once he said it out loud, he was able to open up to others."

As a living bridge from that lost pre-war Jewish world—through one of humanity's darkest chapters and into the present—Harris is today a vibrant presence. Yes, he moves with a walker, but he also rolls into the lobby of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in a fresh blue shirt, smiling and cracking jokes, his wife by his side. He passes by a display of Jewish faces—one of them his own. Many of those faces are no longer here. But he is.

"I did not tell you this to weaken you," reads a line woven through the portraits, *"but to strengthen you."*

The youngest of seven children, Harris was born in 1935 as Szlamek Rzeznik in Dęblin, Poland. His father was a sofer, a scribe who wrote and restored Torah scrolls and other sacred texts. At four years old, he was just old enough to remember the final moments of normalcy—Sabbath dinners, weekend visits to his grandparents by horse-drawn carriage. A last taste of a normal life, the sweetness of love and laughter, which helped him endure what was to come.

It was September 1939.

"I clearly remember sitting at lunch," he says. *"We heard noises in the sky. The German Luftwaffe flew in to destroy the Polish Air Force. Dęblin had an airfield. Soon, these planes also attacked the people. That was the first time I saw death."*

The Nazis quickly occupied Dęblin and forced Jewish families into a ghetto. Food became scarce. Harris's older sister, Rosa, was forced to work at the airfield's labor camp and brought back what little food she could for the family.

One day in 1942, trucks carrying Nazi soldiers entered the ghetto. Armed with rifles and bayonets, they drove the Jews onto the town's marketplace.

"If someone refused or didn't move fast enough, the soldiers stabbed or shot them," Harris says.

Nearby, cattle cars waited to transport the Jews to an extermination camp. Harris believes their destination was the camp near the village of Treblinka in eastern Poland, where an estimated 700,000 to 900,000 Jews were murdered.

"I stood in line with my father, who held my hand," says Harris. *"Since I was so small, I could only see people's legs and hear gunshots. All I could do was look up at the sky. I felt like a guardian angel was there to protect me."*

Harris's father pushed the boy out of the line and ordered him to run. Fortunately, the Nazi soldiers didn't notice, and he ran away. He saw his sister Sara hiding behind some bricks. The two children crouched and silently watched as their parents, cousins, brothers, sisters, and neighbors were taken toward the cattle cars. That was the last time Harris saw them.

Harris and Sara later reunited with their older sister Rosa. Constantly on the run, Rosa smuggled them into the forced labor camp. Harris was too young to work and would have been shot if discovered. His job was to hide.

Fate also played a role. Another prisoner, an Austrian Jew named Hermann Wenkart, recognized a Nazi soldier he had served with in the Austrian army during World War I. The soldier, Eduard Bromofsky, had been wounded in battle, and Wenkart had saved his life by carry-

ing him to safety. Bromofsky introduced his savior to his SS comrades, who, impressed by Wenkart's bravery, appointed him as the camp elder.

In 1944, as the Nazi troops retreated from the advancing Russians, they relocated Jewish forced laborers to a concentration camp near Częstochowa in southern Poland to produce ammunition for the front. Before leaving, Wenkart ensured that an officer signed a letter requesting that his daughter, Ruthi, and other arriving children be spared.

Meanwhile, Harris and his sisters arrived in Częstochowa, where a guard quickly tried to push Harris aside.

"My sister Rosa cried, and I didn't want to leave," he recalls. "Well, the guard kicked me right in my little chest."

The guard grabbed Harris and took him to a room with four other children, all scheduled to be shot the next day. One of those children was Ruthi.

Wenkart made sure the letter was given to a Nazi officer in the camp. At first, the officer agreed only to spare Ruthi. Wenkart shook his head and insisted, "Either all or none." The Nazi officer finally relented and let the children stay.

During the day, Harris lived in the shadows. He slept in a women's barracks and constantly wet the bed out of fear of going to the latrine, where prisoners who had tried to escape were hanged.

"My bedding was a straw sack, and it started to rot," he says. "I lay on it and got fleas and lice. They were everywhere, in my ears, and my whole body was pink."

In January 1945, the Soviet army liberated the camp in Częstochowa. Harris was so hungry that when a fellow prisoner brought him a lump of butter from the kitchen, he ate the whole piece and got sick.

With rags for shoes, Harris hitchhiked with other survivors back to Dęblin, but their homes had been occupied by civilians. Harris and Sara were then placed in an orphanage after Rosa married a Jewish man from Vienna. In 1946, Rosa managed to smuggle Sam and Sara out of Poland to Austria and arranged for them to be adopted in the United States. After a stormy Atlantic crossing, they arrived in New York in 1947.

"The three words I learned on the ship were 'yes,' 'no,' and 'Coca-Cola,'" Harris recalls.

What was America like for a boy who had grown up in a small Polish town and spent the last five years in one horrific camp after another? "I chewed gum," he says. *"We had white bread. I remember seeing Americans sitting with their feet on their desks, leaning back, eating steak. I thought that was pretty great."*

The two siblings were adopted by different families.

"Nobody wanted two children from the concentration camps," he notes.

He was adopted by the Harris family and moved to Northbrook, while Sara lived with a family in Chicago.

Growing up, he just wanted to "be an American boy." He joined every club, became class president, and was popular among his peers, who had no idea what he had been through.

"I had made up my mind to build a wall around my head, a concrete wall, and not talk about it."

That was during the day when he could control his thoughts. But at night, disturbing dreams broke through that wall.

"My adoptive mother would sit with me, crying, when I screamed," he says.

Harris went to college and built a successful career in insurance. As his business grew, he joined Rotary in 1967. A cousin, a member of the first Rotary Club in Chicago, took him to a meeting.

"I really liked it," Harris says, "and I've been a Rotarian ever since."

In 1978, NBC aired the miniseries *Holocaust* over four nights. More than 100 million Americans watched it, and it was credited with making the term "Holocaust" widely recognized. That same year, President Jimmy Carter established a commission that led to the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. What would later become the Illinois Holocaust Museum also had its beginnings. Harris calls it "a little museum," which opened in 1984 in a storefront in Skokie. Donations trickled in. In 2006, the Glencoe Public Library donated records from the Nuremberg Trials.

Harris wrote his story in a book, *Sammy: Child Survivor of the Holocaust*. But by the 1990s, he realized that a storefront—and even his book—would not be enough. But how do you build a museum? Where do you start?

Being an active Rotarian was key.

"I was at a roundtable discussion with a group of Rotarians," Harris says. "I said, 'Hey, I volunteered last night to build a museum.' Everyone wanted to be involved. One person said they would help me raise money. Another offered to find the land, and someone else would handle the architecture. My first committee was in Rotary. They all volunteered to work with me."

As the museum neared completion, Harris emphasized the importance of making it more than just a memorial—it had to be a living part of the community.

"The purpose of the museum is to educate people," Harris says. "As we move further away from World War II... gas chambers, killing all those people—people don't know about it anymore."

A recent survey of Americans under 40 found that 12 percent had never heard the word "Holocaust." Nearly half couldn't name a concentration camp, and 63 percent didn't know how many Jews were murdered.

In the late 1980s, Harris joined a successful campaign that required Illinois public schools to teach Holocaust history.

Harris's cracked leather belt is displayed in the museum.

"This belt is the only thing I have left from the concentration camps," he says.

The museum opened in 2009 in a stark gray and white building designed by renowned architect Stanley Tigerman, symbolizing a journey from darkness to light.

Harris remains deeply involved in youth outreach through Rotary.

"I don't want this brutal tragedy to happen to other children just because of their race," he says.

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.