

OSIRIDE BROVEDANI

from Buchenwald  
to Belzen



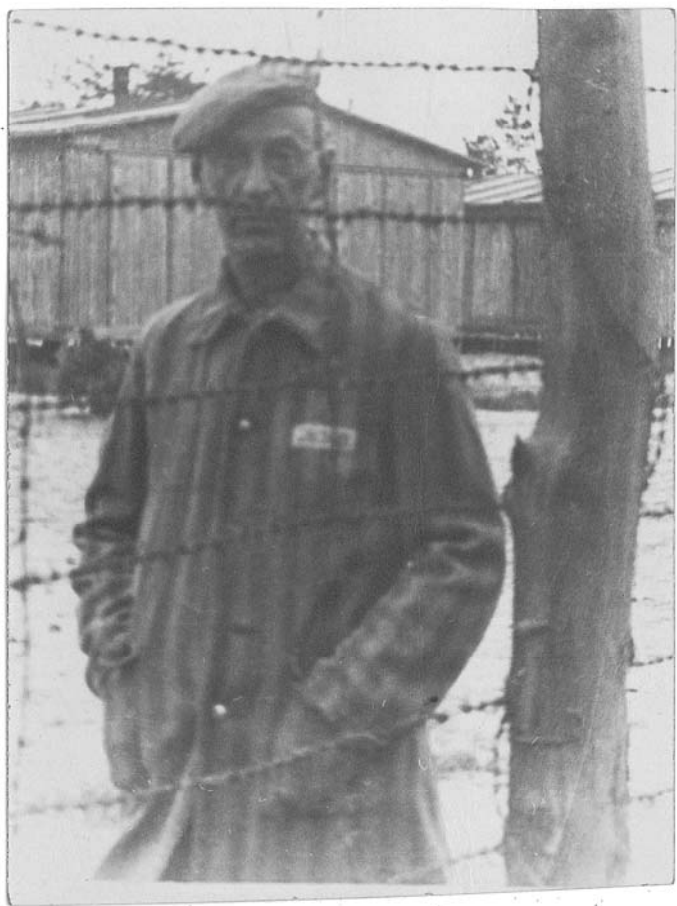
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**Osiride Brovedani**

**From Buchenwald  
to Belsen  
The living's Hell**

**Memoirs of a deportee  
76360**

**From  
the Foundation to  
Osiride**



## FAREWELL TRIESTE! ITALY FAREWELL...

It all began one sunny day in August 1944. In full view of the few early-rising passers-by who were walking down via Nizza, a column of lorries appeared, packed full with men of all ages, dressed in civilian clothes, some with suitcases, others without, who, with dumbfounded, pale faces stared one final time at Trieste. Surrounded as they were by SS officers and Gestapo agents, they were unable to speak to the passers-by who had curiously gathered around them. At 5:30 am the column set off, headed towards Monfalcone. It was one of the weekly convoys sent by the Germans to Germany.

In Monfalcone, the men were forced to board railway freight wagons, thirty per wagon. At noon, the train departed. In the six hours or

so during which the train had remained in the station, word that a large group of Italians was leaving for Germany had spread throughout the area and when the convoy stopped in Ronchi, Sagrado, Gorizia, Cormons and Udine, in a touching gesture, groups of locals were waiting at the station to hand out bread and fruit to all those about whose sad fate nobody was deluding themselves.

This was the final goodbye from Italy, from our people, the last selfless act of fraternal solidarity. How many hopes must have been shattered one by one starting that day, which marked the start of a brutal experience, a terrible ordeal which was to last almost one year.

## HEARTBREAKING MEMORIES

While the train crossed the Friulian plain and on the horizon, the Carnia mountains and the Giulie Alps drew ever nearer, I thought back to the nightmarish days I had spent in Coroneo prison, where, together with forty-two other people I had been held hostage.

It was 21 July, just after the failed attack on Hitler. A prison guard came to the cell in which I was being held and ordered me to

follow him with the few belongings I had with me. My heart skipped a beat: perhaps liberation was underway? It was a short-lived illusion. In fact, I was led to cell n°118. At least, after twelve days in isolation, I was now able to communicate with other prisoners. Cell n°118 was a large room with sixteen straw mattresses arranged on the floor. I joined another twelve men, young and old, who had been brought garamond there before me from other cells in the prison. By noon we were twenty-one. Some, who had been imprisoned for five months, told us that cells 118 and 119 had a bad reputation in Coroneo: they were those reserved for hostages.

The day before, three bombs had exploded in two barracks and in a brothel popular among Germans. Four Nazi soldiers had been injured. The reason for our confinement therefore became clear to us, especially when we heard that in the cell next-door, number 119, another twenty-one detainees had been assembled.

I did not know how reliable this information was. I tried, nonetheless, to find out from my co-detainees whether the accusation that had been made against me was serious. Some of the other prisoners had been caught with weapons in their possession, fighting

against Germans, while others had not yet been questioned, and so had no idea of why they had been arrested. This is how I met the Behar's, a father and son from Abbazia, who were accused of supporting the partisans. I also met Prodan, a draughtsman from the San Marco shipyard in Trieste and four men from Friuli: Settomini, Zamet, Ugo Tomasini and Antonio Canadese from Ronchi. We were terrified by the uncontrolled voices that said we were all going to face a firing squad, especially because that day we had been denied our usual hourly recreation time in the prison's inner courtyard and surveillance by the prison guards had been stepped up. For that matter, we were right to be overwhelmed by fear, as we had learned that from 8 to 10 pm or to 4 am, the SS came to collect hostages and take them to the Opicina firing range.

A few days later, we found out that some detainees had been taken to the Risiera di San Sabba compound to be assassinated and cremated. We were so disturbed by this news that some of my cell mates started to send home items of clothing, watches, money and valuable possessions, in case of tragic unexpected events which may happen at the hands of the SS commander.

The anguished mood of my cell mates



only disheartened me further. In their state of great consternation, some marked their first and last names on the wall with the date, a cross and the words: "shot dead on 26.8.44". Others wrote down their last wishes. One prayed the rosary, while another lay stupefied on his straw mattress.

On the first day, any noise of footsteps in the corridor made us jump. Were they coming to get us? Had our time come? The footsteps did not slow down and gradually grew fainter. We let out a momentary sigh of relief: it must have been the prison bakers heading to work at dawn.

Daybreak was always a time of desperation for us. Then, when the first rays of sunlight gilded the roof of the house opposite, I thanked God for allowing me see a tiny square of blue through the bars of the window. On the second morning, we felt a little more at ease: if they hadn't come for us the day before, then that was already a good sign. Later, I found out that the attacks, which had resulted in our harsh prison conditions, had been perpetrated by German soldiers belonging to the Wehrmacht, in a show of solidarity with those trying to take Hitler's life.

The following days were spent in much the same way: the only distraction being the newspapers, with news of the Avranches break-

through in the west and the Polish front breakthrough in the east. All of this made us hope that by October or November the war may come to an end, with Germany being defeated.

On 2 August at 6 am, twelve detainees from my cell were called to attend a trial prepared against them. Their bodies and faces were shaved and at 8 am one by one, they were led to a courtroom at the Palace of Justice, to answer for their actions before a court made up of five sinister-looking German judges, dressed in black.

The first to be heard was Canadese. After a quarter of an hour, he was already back in our cell.

“Long live Stalin, comrades!” – he exclaimed, raising a clenched fist.

“How did it go?” – we asked apprehensively.

“Sentenced to death” – he answered – “But hopefully they won’t have time to get around to it”.

On 20 September 1944, Canadese was taken from Coroneo to the Risiera. Only one year later did we find out that he was killed there and cremated on 21 September 1944.

Next it was the turn of the Behar’s. After another quarter of an hour, they returned to the cell pale faced. “We’ve both been sentenced to death” – they declared. The trial was no more

than a macabre charade with a fixed format. It went like this: the accusation was read out, which was merely a testimony written in German and signed by the accused, even though this had not been translated into Italian. As if this were not enough, the testimony contained facts that had been denied by the accused during the interrogation. There was no point in the detainee challenging the veracity of the confessions attributed to him, as the presiding judge, who, like the others was dressed in a gown decorated with the inevitable white skull, the emblem of the SS, simply stated, "You have signed the testimony, therefore you have confessed".

The defendant attempted to explain that he had been made to sign it, even though the document was written in a language he did not understand. Then the presiding judge leaned towards the public prosecutor, who murmured a few words to him. After which, the presiding judge rose to his feet and pronounced the death sentence, granting the defendant the right to seek a pardon from the *Gauleiter* Reiner, the Adriatic coast supreme commander. In a unique case, a man sentenced to death sought a pardon for his three innocent sons; in this case, the presiding judge changed the sentence into ten years' imprisonment.

## TOWARDS THE CONCENTRATION CAMP

The train that carried us northwards was travelling too fast. Towards Dogna I bid farewell to the Montasio mountain and its divine beauty. Will I see you again, my dear summer climbing companion? Will I ever admire the splendour of the Giulie Alps again, or am I greeting them for the final time?

In Udine, other prisoners were boarded: there was a man from Trieste, doctor Sabba and *cavaliere* Landi from Torviscosa. Both hoped that partisans would stop the train along the way and allow us to flee. Another pipe dream!

The closer we drew to the border, the more memories came flooding into my mind and a lump formed in my throat. My eyes brimmed with tears as we passed Valbruna. The Jof Fuart stood out clearly against the blue sky, with the summit illuminated by the setting sun. In Tarvisio, I waved goodbye to the five points, Mangart, the ponze, all the peaks that I had climbed a few years before.

Now, locked in a cattle wagon and guarded by menacing SS officers wielding machine guns, I was to suffer an unforeseeable fate. It was as though something had been uprooted inside me and I felt weakened to the point of feeling pain similar to that a blooming

plant must feel when it is ripped from the earth.

At 8 pm we crossed the border, continuing our journey through Villach. I had now bid farewell to my homeland, to the land of the sun, where the colours blue and green are omnipresent, to the beautiful crown of my Giulie Alps and my beloved Dolomites, the Cevedale and Ortler glaciers: all mountains which reminded me of dear, lasting friendships, feelings of kindness, brotherhood and love.

We spent the night in the wagon, at a standstill at a deserted platform in Villach station. The next morning was cold, damp and grey. The train was already travelling up Drava valley. I was well-acquainted with this stretch which led to Salzburg. I saw a deserted Bad Gastein. Salzburg was shrouded in a deathly silence, although it was now noon. How could I forget it? Six years previously, I had been in Salzburg, recovering from an ascension of the Grossglockner. It was precisely 18 September 1938, the day on which Mussolini ranted and raved in Piazza Unità in Trieste, and I met up with my climbing friend at the peak of the illustrious mountain.

At Salzburg station, a few Austrian soldiers asked us for Lira. They paid more for it than the official exchange rate. A good sign!

That day, we saw Munich once more; it

had been badly hit. The next morning, we arrived in Nuremberg. The vision of these large cities was oppressive. The streets were deserted. We noticed only women and children. The same was true in small towns. An atmosphere of apprehension reigned in Germany, even though it was the height of summer and nature appeared blooming with greenery, the sky was free of clouds and the panorama was resplendent. "The wheels have to turn for victory", was a slogan we read in all of the stations: a phrase which, in our eyes, seemed bereft of meaning, after all, who believed in victory anymore?

In Nuremberg, we were given a little thin soup and coffee substitute without sugar. Then we set off once again through the forest. Once famous holiday spots, these places were now deserted – just like the towns and suburbs. It was Sunday. Near to a few factories we could see Russian, French and even Italian prisoners of war, soaking up the sun's rays.

No one knew where we were headed. I remembered how, in Trieste prison in via Nizza, a corrupt SS officer called Visintin, who served as our interpreter, had reassured me. He tried to put our minds at rest, saying that we were going to be allowed to work freely in Germany. But who could give credence to his word?

Once we had passed through Franconia, with its vast expanses of fields, now yellow with stubble, the convoy entered Thuringia. In Nuremberg, several railway wagons containing soldiers, tanks and cannons had been hooked onto the train, protected by anti-aircraft machine guns. I remember how, while we were at a standstill, a man who knew a smattering of our language after spending some time in Italy, and believing that we were Italian soldiers in plain clothes, said to us with disdain: "You Italians, no fight, no eat...".

## ARRIVAL AT BUCHENWALD

At 6 am, after a three-day journey, the doors of the railway wagons were opened and we were made to disembark. Half a dozen SS officers were waiting for us, led by a brute of a man with a club in his hand, who ordered us to get in groups of five and started dealing out heavy blows to the backs of those who were not perfectly aligned. After scrutinising us with contempt, he gave the marching order.

We left the small terminal station of the Weimar-Buchenwald line, and headed towards the camp. At a crossroads, I noticed a sign which depicted a priest, a civilian and a Jew.

The arrow pointed towards a large gate, on which was written, "Everyone gets what they deserve".

The gate opened. We were counted with precision and made to enter Buchenwald concentration camp, which had been established in 1936 and which was destined to imprison the enemies of Nazism, who at that time, consisted of socialists and German communists. Still in groups of five, we marched along paved roads. Then in groups of twenty, we entered a large room.

There were rows of huts, and men dressed in some kind of pyjamas with grey and blue vertical stripes, were coming and going. Every now and then, we saw an SS soldier holding a whip. The undefinable atmosphere of a camp for criminals or those sentenced to forced labour, shocked us greatly. I was immediately struck in particular by a dark brick block, topped with a very tall, wide, rectangular chimney, I soon found out that this was the crematorium.

My group stopped in front of a two-storey building. This was to be the first stage in surrendering our personalities. We were ordered to strip naked. Our civilian clothes were wrapped in paper bags; our money, watches and any other items of value were placed in a



separate bag. Several prisoners in charge of this task carried out the operations. Everything took place at a brisk pace, almost automatically, without a hitch. In exchange for my belongings, I was issued with a number.

From this room, we were led to another, in which two dozen barbers – who also appeared to be deportees – proceeded to shave literally every hair off our bodies with electric hair trimmers. I was then made to enter another department – the shower room. But before enjoying this pleasure, one by one we were forced to immerse ourselves in a tub containing disinfectant.

Wearing wooden-soled shoes, I was then led to another immense room. As we walked past a long counter, other detainees tossed us a shirt, a pair of trousers, a cap and a civilian jacket with an X painted on the back, which seemed to confirm the obliteration – that I had already sensed – of our personality. As we left, we were nothing more than a bunch of men in rags, many of us unrecognisable compared with one hour before.

**N. 76360**

Using this method, the Nazi organisation

hoped to imprint an easily distinguishable brand on political deportees, levelling them off to a standardised type of man deprived of his freedom and of all his rights. We were taken to the administrative offices, and forced to sign a series of forms, on which were entered the amount of money which had been confiscated from us and exchanged into marks, the brand of our watch, the rings, and the other valuable items which had been handed over a few moments before.

Although we were 76 people, the process took less than an hour. Finally, a personal file was filled in, with our personal details, nationality, address, profession and ancestry. Once this final and humiliating task was completed, in exchange for my personality, I was issued with a number: 76360.

Now the so-called little camp, reserved for newcomers awaited us, where we had to spend five weeks in quarantine. We were all in a dream-like state and were finding it difficult to walk because of our wooden-soled shoes. The little camp was overflowing with Frenchmen, who had arrived a few days before from various prisons around France. They had been evacuated following the Avranches breakthrough.

We were housed in hut n° 62, where I learned how to sleep crammed in like sardines:

six people in a space two metres wide and fifty centimetres high, where it was impossible even to sit up straight and, as if this were not enough, where we were plagued by millions of fleas.

Our arrival sparked great interest among the long-standing camp detainees, who, being cut off from the world, were eager to hear news about the attack on Hitler, about the predictions that were circulating regarding a rapid end to the war, about living conditions in Italy, which was now dominated by the Germans and about Mussolini's remaining possibilities to rely on a strong army intended to support the Führer. I was immediately shocked to notice how a few years of segregation deformed the personality of a deportee, whose existence now centred around seeking any small improvement to his precarious material living conditions.

During the imposed quarantine period, the daily rhythm went as follows: we were woken up at 4 am and given a coffee substitute, 20 grams of margarine alternated with sausage or jam and half a kilo of bread. One hour later, we were sent in groups of one hundred to the wash house. Then, come rain or shine, we were forced to remain out in the open until 8 am to give the workers assigned to this task, time to brush and wash the hut. At 10:30 am we were called together once again for the distribution of

one litre of soup and at 4 pm, half a litre of coffee substitute without sugar. During the quarantine period, we were not required to work.

## HUMAN CONTACT

The brusque transformation of the lives we had once lived, surrounded by affectionate families and involved in our careers, into this collective, inhumane and unhygienic existence, surrounded by people speaking different languages, with different cultures and civilisations, brought about an imbalance in me that I was only able to overcome partially – and never fully – after several months. Even among us Italians, it seemed as though living together in that hell hole slackened our ties, perhaps since, after one month of talking to one another, we no longer had anything to say.

The hut looked like the gangway of a black slave-trade ship: there was a wide corridor, with, on each side, four layers of bunks, crammed with Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Frenchmen, Czechs, Italians and a few Germans, who constituted the labour force to be used for the hardest and most insalubrious tasks, which were indispensable given the

continued bombing raids carried out by the allies on the major train routes and on the cities affected by the dogged air offensive.

On 22 August, a convoy of around two thousand Frenchmen arrived. Most had been rounded up in the streets, bars and cinemas of Paris. Before leaving cities, the Nazis made sure to gather together some cheap manpower. These deportees told how they had been loaded on cattle wagons on 12 August, in exceedingly hot temperatures, eighty per wagon, without food or water. During the day, the temperature in the wagons soared to over forty degrees. The journey had lasted for ten days.

I remember speaking with a Sorbonne philology professor, a forty-something intellectual, with an intense interior life, who was unable to endure the brutal harshness of that treatment. A few days after his arrival in Buchenwald, he still appeared disoriented due to the suffering he had experienced.

Those who were able to best withstand concentration camp life were the common criminals from Santé prison in Paris. They were clearly used to a reckless type of lifestyle, full of unexpected events. I noticed how these 'gentlemen' had the ability and the craftiness required to only do the least tiring jobs, while the more arduous tasks fell to teachers,

musicians, architects, doctors and other professionals.

Every two or three days another convoy arrived, mostly from France and Poland. From the latter country, threatened by the Russian advance, came a majority of Jews who had survived the Lublin and Auschwitz extermination camps. They could be recognised immediately due to their shocking physical appearance: nothing more than skin and bone, without any luggage and always starving. A high percentage of them died.

The Polish concentration camps were being evacuated and thousands of veritable slave labourers were flowing into Buchenwald, leading to such a situation of overpopulation in the quarantine area that the camp management were obliged to erect five large tents to house all of these aching, exhausted people, who were morally and physically destroyed.

Coming back to us, during the first few days, our daily lives were monotonous. We did not suffer too greatly due to the deprivation. The only thing we could not adapt to was going to the so-called latrines during the night in pitch darkness. These were located in a typical Nazi construction: a thirty-metre long hut, in the centre of which there was a two and a half metre deep trough. At rush hour, the low brick wall, topped with a wooden plank and a few

back rests, was filled with no fewer than two hundred squatting deportees who, either because of the change in their diet or because of the dirty water they were drinking, were suffering from dysentery.

It is worthy of note that these collective latrines were emptied and cleaned early every morning, so staying there for too long on an August afternoon became a torture due to the stench that took your breath away and the countless flies. The only comfort I had during those long summer days, was getting acquainted with many people of different nationalities, including numerous men from Istria and Friuli, arrested during the roundups with no specific accusation. There were also Frenchmen, Poles and Ukrainians, the latter were unpopular with the Russians as they were considered to be German sympathisers. But quite a few of these came from the ranks of the so-called free workers, who – having understood that the allies were now assured of victory– had been eager to commit any punishable offence so as to create an alibi proving their loathing of the Nazis.

## THE FIRST AIR RAID

I had only been at Buchenwald for three

days, when I experienced the first air raid. At around 11 am, the alarm sounded. During the previous days, great formations of four-engined aircraft had streaked across the sky on their way to Jena, Gera, Erfurt, Magdeburg and Leuna. In the distance, we often heard a dull rumbling and saw the accompanying clouds of smoke.

On that day at 11 am, the camp sirens sounded and we all hid in the huts, as that was the order we had received. After half an hour, a reconnaissance aircraft came into view, dropping two smoke bombs on the area around the factory which produced rifles, handguns and Gustloff anti-tank guns, apparently owned by the *Gauleiter* of Thuringia, Fritz Sauckel.

The first waves of four-engined aircraft were not long in coming; dropping cluster bombs on the SS barracks and forcibly hitting the large Gustloff factory, almost destroying it completely. From our hut, we followed what was happening apprehensively. The air pressure produced by the explosions rocked our flimsy shelter to the core, but despite all of this, we weren't so scared: deep down we knew that the raids were not aimed at us.

In fact, the only bomb that landed on the camp was an incendiary fragmentation bomb, which slightly damaged the wash house, while the huts used for sawing and joinery, about fifty



metres apart, took a direct hit and were set alight by fragmentation bombs. We all admired the precision of the hit and the knowledge surrounding the relative location of the various targets.

Later, we discovered that many of the deportees who were at work in the factory, confident that this building would not be targeted, had preferred to stay inside the plant instead of seeking shelter in the nearby woods. As a result, 460 had been killed and around 510 injured.

Nonetheless, the destruction of the factory sparked in the prisoners a sense of profound satisfaction, particularly because they felt they belonged to a growing number who one day in the not too distant future, would shatter the dominant Nazi power.

Due to the bombings, in the afternoon, the camp hospital was so full of injured people that many had to be housed in makeshift huts and in the prostitutes' quarters. It was at that time that I discovered that the wounded included Princess Mafalda, the wife of Prince Philipp of Hesse, who had been arrested by the Germans and deported to Buchenwald. She had been housed in a small unit outside the camp, along with other 'special deportees', including Leon Blum, the secretary of the German

socialist party, whose name I forget, and others.

On 25 August, another seven hundred prisoners arrived. They were all elderly German citizens. They received special treatment: they did not have their hair shaved and were allowed to keep their own clothes and shoes. They were victims of the so-called *Aktion Himmler*; that is, they all belonged to the dissolved socialist and catholic parties, which previously had not been targeted, as they had withdrawn from politics in 1933. Now, with the pretext of the attack on Hitler, they had been – according to the German expression – ‘rendered harmless’ and sent to various concentration camps. It is thought that at least twenty-seven thousand people were seized in this way.

This initiative was clear proof of the Nazi regime’s fear that an effective opposition could rise up, of which the attack on Hitler should be considered a dangerous symptom. From what I learned at the time, I had reason to believe that the organisation of the attack had much more extensive ramifications than the German press wished to admit. I remember that around 20 June 1944, in Trieste, a Wehrmacht soldier of Austrian origin had confided to me: “soon, you Italians will hear of an event that will give you immense joy”. He would not say any more, but thinking back to it, he was actually making a

cryptic reference to the attack being prepared against the Führer.

## CONCENTRATION CAMP ORGANISATION

As time went by, I became increasingly aware of the concentration camp's organisation. Run by SS and the state police – the Gestapo – the camp leader or *Lagerfuhrer* used the SS to enforce orders given to the various *kapos* and *kapo assistants* – prisoners of German nationality – and to the deportees of all other nationalities.

The functioning was governed according to a harsh discipline and everything was carried out rapidly and with precision. The various departments and offices – kitchen, wash house, bathroom, clothing storeroom, disinfection room, hospital, registration office, work statistics office, vegetable garden and cattle shed – required the man power of several thousand deportees. Approximately another ten thousand worked in the Gustloff factory, in joinery and in the stone quarry. In total, twenty thousand people worked constantly at the camp.

Another twenty-five thousand men – the floating workers – filled positions that became vacant due to the death of deportees working at Buchenwald's sub camps, in an area stretching

from Riga to Cologne and from Magdeburg to Nordhausen, where, hidden six kilometres from the city, was the most secret and infamous concentration camp of them all, provoking terror in all those who had survived it and known, who knows why, by the woman's name, Dora. Getting back to our camp, this was enclosed by a triple wire fence, with a high tension electrical current running through it. Every fifty metres there was a tower equipped with a spotlight. In the overlying cabin, a Ukrainian SS officer was roosted, armed with a rifle.

Apart from their registration number, every deportee had a coloured triangle and the initial of their nationality sewn on their jacket and trousers. A red triangle stood for political deportee, a green triangle stood for common criminal, black saboteur, purple bible scholar, pink pederast, red with a white stripe expelled from the Wehrmacht, yellow Jew and black with the letter Z, Gypsy.

In August 1944 in Germany, terror had reached its climax, an evident sign that the Nazi regime felt the end was coming. People were being sent to concentration camps for the most unimaginable reasons. For example, a farmer who had many foreigners working for him, mainly prisoners of war, had had an affair with a

Ukrainian peasant girl, who had been working for two years on his farm. As a consequence of the affair, the young woman was about to give birth and the farmer asked the local section of the party for the authorisation to marry her. In response, he was sent to Buchenwald.

A man from Trieste named Giuseppe Giordani, was sent to Buchenwald due to a name mix-up. When the mistake was flagged up in the control office on the day of his arrival, the *Rapportführer* resolved the case in a typically Nazi manner: "Now you are here – he said – you may as well stay. You'll see what a great time you will have". An Italian civilian worker, Davide Vidoni from Tolmezzo, a bricklayer who had come voluntarily to Germany in 1936, had been working in 1940 on the construction of a factory in Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance. When the huge complex – made up of workshops for preparing the V-1 – was completed in 1942, Davide was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. The truth was that the Germans did not trust foreigners working towards the war effort and after making use of their abilities, they imprisoned them in the concentration camps to prevent them, once free, or when on leave, from reporting on what they had done and seen.

The decision taken regarding the bricklayer

from Friuli turned out to be not only inhumane but also useless as a few months after it opened for service, the factory was razed to the ground by two massive bombing raids by Flying Fortresses.

## THE UNDERGROUND FACTORIES

It was in 1942 that the idea was born to create underground assembly shops. To this end, towards the end of the year, thousands and thousands of deportees were sent to Mühlheim in Lorraine, to Cologne, to Nordhausen and to Magdeburg, to begin the backbreaking work of digging the tunnels, in twelve-hour shifts, day and night. The works to prepare the underground plants were of titanic proportions. The Harz mountains in Thuringia were drilled through and the extermination camps Dora, Emma and Laura were established.

These colossal works saw participation from some big Nazi names, including Goring and Saukel, in all likelihood, it was said, stakeholders in the Wifo, Amoniak, Junker and Askania companies. Also at this time, dozens and dozens of men were rounded up along the main roads of Friuli and Istria, while they were cycling to work. Their bikes were seized and the

unfortunate souls were imprisoned in Udine or in Pula before being sent to Buchenwald, without even being questioned.

Apart from these cases, which were beyond the realm of politics, there were tens of thousands of partisans of every nationality, abettors, members of the Liberation Committees and communists. Many were Poles, who had been dispossessed of their land. These people made up a special category: when the Russians invaded Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, many Germans living there were ordered to move to Poland which was occupied by the Nazis. Depending on the profession and capital soundness of each of those Germans, who had been evacuated from the Baltic states, the Nazi governor of Poland, Frank, ordered that Polish professionals, land owners, shopkeepers and industrialists be dispossessed of their property and companies without any compensation; they were expelled from their homes and deported to concentration camps, while their belongings were placed under the trustee administration of the German newcomers.

## DRESSED LIKE CONVICTS

After two weeks in Buchenwald, during which

we were subject to a series of anti-typhus and dysentery injections – diseases which raged in the concentration camp due to the polluted water – a ceremony took place at the camp which definitively removed any last hope concerning our fate of remaining deportees for life in the case of a Nazi victory: we were dressed in a convict's jacket and trousers: the ill-famed grey and blue striped pyjamas.

Dressed in this way and wearing wooden-soled shoes, we were now ready to be sent to the places of work and death. After only a few days, a group of fifteen of our fellow countrymen was chosen to depart. Destination unknown. We bid them farewell with a heavy heart, hoping to see them again soon after liberation.

Unfortunately, this group of people chosen to leave, included several whom I would never see again such as *cavaliere* Landi from Torviscosa and professor Gasperini from Pula. I discovered later that they had gone to Dora, from where they were sent to the Ellrich camp, which was still under construction. The conditions there were inhumane, with little food and incredibly hard, heavy work for twelve hours a day, mistreated by the deportee kapos, picked from the ranks of common criminals, the so-called 'greens'. This mob of German



criminals had been regurgitated from German prisons and promised freedom in exchange for good service in the favour of Nazism inside the destruction camps.

After only twenty days, of the 76 Italians who had arrived at Buchenwald, only six were still working in the camp. The others, mixed up with Russians, Poles and Frenchmen, had all left in small groups for various destinations: Berlin, Cologne, Magdeburg, Aschersleben, Dora, and so on. They were camps of varied dimensions, built approximately ten kilometres from major cities, all tightly sealed by barbed wire fences with a high tension electrical current running through them, and guarded by the usual towers each housing a soldier armed with rifle.

It was during this period that I came into contact with other Italians who had been deported to Buchenwald and who had come from French concentration camps. They belonged to the Italian brigades which had combatted Francoism in Spain. Of this group, I recall Ciuffoli, Maraldi, Sarpi and Berti, who gave me news of a friend of mine, Ravagnan from Chioggia, whom I had not heard from in years.

With their help, I managed to obtain a job as clerk in the hospital records office, where the kapo was an ex-German communist deputy,

Karl Busse; while running the office was Karl Janak, the former deported twelve years previously and the latter, tracked down in France by the German occupying troops. Both gave me a great deal of moral and material help. I must also say that all the years of imprisonment had not destroyed their spirit of human brotherhood. The same cannot be said, however, for many of our fellow countrymen of the new generation, who were pseudo-partisans and classical opportunists, who obeyed the Germans' orders more than necessary, imitating their brutality and even their language.

## DEATH AND LIFE AT THE CAMP

In the office where I worked organising files and typing, I was able to increase my knowledge of concentration camp organisation. It was interesting to discover the way in which the families of deportees were informed of the death of their loved one. The true cause was carefully masked by a tuberculosis or bronchial pneumonia diagnosis or blamed on a weak heart; while in reality almost all of the deaths were due to physical exhaustion, with a daily intake of fewer than a thousand calories.

After one year, a normal man, weighing

eighty kilos, had lost between twenty-five and thirty, becoming, after the second year no more than a skeleton weighing thirty to thirty-five kilos. Downfall and death would ensue. In theory, the family could request the deceased's ashes, in exchange for 12.50 marks.

I doubt, however, that the ashes were really those of the dead person, as in the crematorium, up to twenty bodies were burnt at once in a restricted space, designed for ten corpses.

Deaths were confirmed by the chief SS medical officer, who never visited the sick and autopsies were not carried out. The deaths were registered in the registry office of the city of Weimar. Only there will we be able to discover one day just how many thousands of men lost their lives at Buchenwald during the ten years it was operating.

A hut located close to the hospital served as the camp brothel. Well furnished, and spotless, run by a *Untersturmführer*, a non-commissioned SS officer, who lived there, the brothel housed around 14 deportees, who worked there as prostitutes. There were three German women, two French women, and a few Polish women and Gypsies.

It was no easy feat to gain access to this service: applicants had to make a request to the hut kapo, who, if he agreed gave the person a

note with which he had to go for a medical visit to ensure he was in good health. By showing another note signed by the doctor and approved by the hospital records office, the deportee could finally go to the brothel after the roll call.

At the brothel, he had to show the medical certificate to the non-commissioned SS officer, pay one mark and was finally allowed to withdraw with one of the women. I must say that this hut was not used a great deal, even though there were at least 45,000 deportees in the concentration camp. Each week there were around sixty brothel visits registered, mostly young Poles, Czechs and Russians, who occupied privileged positions in the camp administration and who benefitted from a double or triple food ration compared with that meted out to the exhausted and starving masses.

## PRINCESS MAFALDA DIES

When on 24 August, the armaments factories were destroyed by allied bombing raids, the Wehrmacht and SS barracks were also hit, as well as several huts outside the camp, housing key personalities who had been deported, including Princess Mafalda. The Princess' hut collapsed in a bombing raid and she remained

buried in the debris for several hours. In the afternoon, she was freed from the rubble and taken, seriously injured, to one of the rooms used by the prostitutes, which had been cleared to make room for the wounded.

She required a blood transfusion and an operation, which Dr Koch, a renowned surgeon from Prague, was ready to carry out. However, the SS commander ordered the operation to be delayed until the SS chief medical officer arrived.

Mafalda was operated on the following day. Rumour had it that the surgeon was not particularly experienced. Others claimed that he lacked the appropriate instruments. The fact of the matter is that after a few hours, the Princess died of blood loss or septicaemia. To begin with, they wanted to cremate her like all the others, but it seems that she was in fact buried in the SS cemetery.

Towards the end of August, several unexpected guests arrived at Buchenwald: American and British airmen, saved thanks to their parachutes and captured in the territory of the German Reich. They were sent to the concentration camp as they were considered to be terrorists and therefore, from a Nazi point of view, criminals not worthy of being treated as prisoners of war, as they should have been

according to international regulations.

They were stripped of their uniforms and all their belongings were confiscated. Then, dressed in worn-out civilian clothes, they were informed they were to work as labourers. However, the airmen resolutely and unanimously refused to subject themselves to any form of exertion. So, they were sent back to the huts, isolated from other deportees and their food rations were reduced. At the end of October, an order came from Berlin to send all of the airmen away, to a destination unknown to us.

There was also another hut that was isolated and cordoned off with a wire fence, which housed around two hundred Oslo university students, as well as several professors who had refused to pledge allegiance to the Quisling pro-Nazi regime. They benefitted from exceptional treatment: they were not required to work, received weekly packages from Norway, were allowed to write letters and ate SS supplies. They were all robust young men, who did a lot of outdoor sport, studied, painted and spent their time chatting and playing. The other deportees observed them with envy. It seemed that in their hut, a humane and civil life lived on, the kind of life that was starting to feel like a distant memory to us.

## EVER MORE ARRIVALS

Towards the end of September, a second convoy arrived from Trieste. It included Dr Pecorari, Dr Bolaffio, the Gaspardi's (father and son), a doctor from Cormons and a Civil Guard officer, a certain Mr Reja. They provided me with news about my city, informing me that the house in which I lived had been hit by a bomb on 10 September. I spent hours worrying about my loved ones who had been involuntarily abandoned and I prayed to God for their protection. It would have been a great comfort to me to have been able to write to my family at that time or to receive news from them, but this was forbidden by the SS commander. Everyone could write letters, except the Italians.

Every two or three weeks, new deportees had started to arrive from our area. This is how I met up with my cell mate from Coroneo prison, Ugo Tommasini, who had been sentenced to death by an SS court in Trieste. On 2 August, I wrote a grace request letter for him to *gauleiter* Reiner. We exulted together over the dangers we had escaped. Later, in April 1945, he took ill and we heard no more about him.

We were very shocked by the arrival of 1,800 Danish police officers arrested ten days previously in Copenhagen and sent without

delay to Buchenwald. We did not have any accurate reports, but this steady, growing stream of men who were fairly up-to-date on the events in the various regions of Europe, allowed us to follow the progress of the war sufficiently clearly.

In the concentration camp, there were two huts one in front of the other, which particularly sparked our curiosity. Two stories high and always tightly sealed, the windows were concealed by matt paper. At the entrance to one of the huts, there was a sign which read: "Institute of hygiene and scientific research".

We quickly discovered that this was a new way of exploiting those sentenced to death. Instead of executing them, they were sent here to be used as human guinea pigs in laboratory experiments carried out in secret and entrusted to SS doctors within the institute. It seems, however, that these experiments, despite the torture inflicted on the convicts, did not give rise to any significant results that benefitted medicine or physiology.

Inhumane methods were by no means unique to SS men; the women too, who had been brought up with National Socialism, were equal to the latter and displayed a brand of sadistic cruelty. I was told that the wife of a *Lagerführer* or camp manager, having caught



COMANDO RAGGRUPPAMENTO BATTAGLIONI "DI PALMA"

Witsenorf, 24 maggio 1945

DICHIARAZIONE

Il ~~capitano~~ *Provedani* *Onide*  
dal..... *Trieste*.....  
matricola... *76360*.....

è rimasto internato nel Campo "DORA" (Nord-  
hausen - Germania) dall' *8. Novembre 1944*  
al 4 Aprile 1945 per il lavoro forzato alla  
costruzione della V<sub>1</sub> e della V<sub>2</sub>.

IL TER. COLONNELLO  
DEL RAGGRUPPAMENTO BATTAGLIONI  
(Dott. Cesare Di Palma)



*Di Palma*

*Onag 89*  
*Strocker*  
*Por. Comd.*



Visto  
CONDOTTIERE DELL'OPERA 83  
(Maj. Col. Pietro Sotta)

*15E*

sight of a beautiful tattoo on the back of a Russian deportee, while he was working bare-chested with a pickaxe, came up with the degenerate idea of adorning her home with a lampshade made not with parchment paper but with tanned human skin. A short while later, she proudly showed off to her guests a lampshade made of tattooed epidermis.

## THE SECRET DORA CAMP

To reach Dora, which was so feared by deportees because of the high mortality rate recorded there, you had to disembark the train at Salza station, 5 kilometres from Nordhausen, on the slopes of the Harz mountains in Thuringia. I arrived there at night, after a journey lasting two days and two nights and covering a distance of less than 120 kilometres. The vision that I had of it reminded me of Doré's illustrations for the Divine Comedy. Flashes of fire and a reddish smoke appeared from halfway up a hill, stretching for around 800 metres. A stifled rumbling was emanating from a series of tunnels, which looked like the gaping mouths of a gigantic Moloch, barely conceivable to me. While I looked in dismay at that mysterious forge, our escort came to meet

us, made up of 20 SS officers, holding ten ferocious looking Alsatians on leashes. In columns of five, we were led along a muddy road in the opposite direction to the flaming tunnels.

As we walked, I could make out in the darkness the solid bulk of a factory, stretching into the open countryside. After about half an hour, I started to recognise a line of huts on both sides of the road, and near to these, heaps of iron, cranes, rails with Decauville coaches and finally, enormous howitzers of unheard-of dimensions, with, at their base, directional wings with a span of over three metres, as well as aluminium tanks in a variety of sizes, railway wagons, and containers; an immense concentration of equipment of all kinds. It was the forge for the V-1 and V-2 secret weapons.

I felt like I had walked into a part of hell and I immediately had the sensation that, after participating in building those secret weapons, we would never be leaving Dora.

I remember that the French deportees composed a little song about Dora:

“Dora, Dora, c’est un chien ou c’est un chat,  
c’est un nom de fleur ou c’est un nom de femme?  
Dora, Dora, eh bien, le jour viendra,  
le jour que nous quitterons Dora!”

The name, which evoked sweetness, goodness and feminine tenderness, concealed the stage of a terrible, terrifying accrual of misery, suffering and death.

In September 1943, after Italy surrendered, this sinister camp, which was now well organised into 140 huts, was still a woodland made up of spruce trees and oaks, at the end of a valley and surrounded by hills. Now, several thousand detainees from Poland, Russia, France, and after October 1943, 686 Italian soldiers, rounded up in the streets while attempting to return home to their families, lived day and night in the tunnels carved out one year previously, working as miners for twelve-hours a day.

## THE TRAGIC FATE OF 686 ITALIANS

A few other thousand men were used to build huts, dig canals, build roads and so on. I would like to tell the story of the group of Italian prisoners because a group of human beings has perhaps never known such a tragic fate; guilty of nothing except being forced to obey orders.

Rounded up at the Kustrin prison camp in Berlin, they were sent to Dora to work. As soon

as they arrived, they were stripped and forced to wear the striped convict's uniform, given a number and mixed up with political deportees and common criminals, enduring the barbaric, inhumane treatment imposed on the latter.

As I remember, 686 of them arrived and by the end of July 1944, 416 had perished. Almost all of them had been sent into the tunnels, where they were condemned to the harshest and most exhausting of tasks, that of mining using pneumatic drills. For twelve hours solid and without interruption, they were forced to breathe in tunnels illuminated with acetylene; the air was poisoned with gas fumes emanating from explosions in the mine and saturated with limestone dust. German and Polish criminals were in charge of monitoring them, competing to make life ever harder for the 'Badoglio pigs', as they were mockingly nicknamed.

To prove their zeal to their bosses, each of these tyrants made sure, particularly during the first few weeks, that the Italians recognised the superiority of the supervisory function that each had been invested with and the invalidity of those wearing the grey and blue deportee uniform. Every time those wretched souls slowed down or made a request, heavy blows would rain down on them. Some of the jailers enjoyed mocking our soldiers, calling them

'fascists', while others referred to them as 'Mussolini' or 'Badoglio': nicknames that were inevitably accompanied by slaps and clubbing with sticks.

After those interminable hours of repetitive, back-breaking work, they were put through the roll call at the entrance to the tunnel, a roll call which usually lasted between two and three hours. After which they were finally allowed to bed down in a dead-end tunnel. The resting time was brief, as only five hours later, the alarm sounded. The men had to clean the tunnel and line up to receive a bowl of soup and delouse. Hygiene was non-existent in that hole. Empty carbide cans were used as toilets; there was no water for washing at all. They were all plagued by lice and after a certain amount of time, by dysentery too. Eating only 400 grams of bread, 20 grams of margarine and a litre of thin soup per day, after a few months, they had all lost between 10 and 15 kilos. And very quickly, death began to knock at the door of that despairing handful of Italians.

For three months, they held out day and night in the tunnels, washing once a week, without changing their clothes, filthy, lacerated, tortured by hunger and feverish, with bleeding fingers; terrorised by the daily deaths of their weaker friends. These once youthful and hardy

men, who in October 1943 had weighed 80 or 90 kilos, after three months of forced labour in the tunnels, had dropped to 50 kilos. The first disease they contracted that went untreated due to a lack of medicine and assistance, rang their death knell and sent them, a few days later, on their last journey on board a lorry to Buchenwald crematorium.

### **THE HEROIC DEATH OF SEVEN ITALIAN ALPINE TROOPERS**

Among the miners, there were seven healthy, strapping Italian Alpine troopers, who did not wish to die like their companions in misfortune. They had remarked that the Polish and Russian miners received an additional ration of half a litre of soup, given that they were forced to work with drilling machines. They asked their watchman, a deportee like any other, I believe from Germany, for treatment in line with that of the Russians. But their request went unheeded. So, to draw attention to their legitimate claim, they declared that if they did not receive an extra ration like the others, they would down tools.

The department watchman reported to the SS tunnel commander that the seven Alpine

troopers were refusing to work, without mentioning the reason for this refusal. The German officer did not speak a word of Italian, nor did the Alpine troopers speak a word of German. Without the help of an interpreter, the officer questioned the Alpine troopers in his own language, while they used hand gestures to try to explain their request.

They were imprisoned and the next day, without any further questioning or formality, they were shot dead near the hut. At the moment of the execution, they behaved like true soldiers. Without hesitation or weakness, they refused to be blindfolded and died like heroes. This happened in December 1943. With this merciless death sentence, the SS commander hoped to warn all Italians and even those of other nationalities that they were not permitted to make any requests: they had only to suffer and endure. He who possessed the physical strength passed the test. The others would die.

## ASTOUNDING FIGURES

Even the hospital organisation fulfilled the aim of exterminating deportees who were unlucky enough to be sent to Dora. It was hoped that disease and a lack of care would take



its toll. The so-called hospital – a temporary hut built outside the tunnels – was always overflowing with patients; three to a bed. To cut the number of those in need of treatment, the order was given that only those injured at work and those with visible illnesses would be accepted. Bronchial pneumonia, flu and a fever of 39-40° C were not considered illnesses requiring hospitalisation. At most, patients were given three days' rest and those with a fever were advised to place a pack of cold water on their head.

Each day, a dozen corpses were transported to a cell from the tunnels under construction: they had died during the night. Stripped naked, they were piled on to a lorry and sent to Buchenwald crematorium, given that Dora did not have one of its own at the time.

As work proceeded on Dora's underground facilities, in the same, inhumane manner, Dora concentration camp was being prepared, as well as that of Ellrich which was 20 kilometres away. The things that went on at Harz, in central Germany, were kept a secret. It was not permitted to travel within a radius of 50 kilometres without special permission. The area had not yet been bombed, which meant that it was considered the safest site for the assembly of the secret weapons, which the Nazis had pinned

their hopes on.

But this frenzied work carried the cost of piles of corpses. Hitler's regime cared little about this. But it is important to know that according to statistics found in records at Dora, in 18 months, 138,000 men of a variety of nationalities passed through that camp, rounded up from all over Europe and by the end of March 1945 only 40,000 had survived. In 18 months, the jaws of the Nazi Moloch had crushed 98,000 human beings.

In November 1944, Dora concentration camp was complete. It had 135 wooden huts to house officers, to be used as dormitories and so on. It had its own crematorium, paved roads, small gardens around the huts, drainage, paths reinforced with bundles of brushwood, and a triple barbed wire fence with a high voltage current, all constructed by thousands of deportees within eight months, under the whip of the SS, assisted by kapos and kapo assistants, who had previously been serving life sentences in German prisons.

Unlike Buchenwald, Dora was filled with common criminals, the so-called 'greens' who were identified by a green triangle. It was they who ran the internal organisation of the camp and who were more relentless than the SS themselves in dealing out club and rubber

truncheon blows. Released from prison, these criminals enjoyed a certain freedom in the camp, they ate copiously, and provided each other with reciprocal protection. In short, in terms of internal organisation, they counted more than the others.

An attempt to substitute them with other 'red' political prisoners – German socialists or communists – had failed. It is true that those deemed undesirable by Buchenwald – the most undisciplined and deranged – were sent to Dora. It was always this group who were responsible for moving deportees under SS orders.

Life at Dora was particularly harsh since most of the kapos and assistants were undesirables from the main camp at Buchenwald: those who had been unpopular due to their lack of integrity, discipline, their ignorance and violence.

## **A HELLISH LIFE AT DORA**

Whereas Buchenwald could be defined as the concentration camp of political prisoners and academics, Dora was considered the camp for petty criminals, who oppressed the unstructured, ignorant, illiterate masses, made up primarily of Ukrainians, Poles, Gypsies, and Frenchmen,

fresh from Santé prison, as well as a few Italians from Gaeta and Peschiera.

Officially, Dora was known as *Arbeits Lager Mittelbau*, that is Mittelbau Labour Camp. Access was prohibited to anyone who did not have a special permit, countersigned by *Lagerführer* Bergher. Written correspondence was addressed to Sangerhausen, more than 100 kilometres from the camp, to maintain the secret of its existence by all ways and means.

Among the 20,000 deportees sent to Dora from Germany's various concentration camps, a selection was made of engineers, technicians of a wide variety of specialities, electricians, mechanics, lathe turners, metal workers and countless men chosen to carry out heavy work and to transport equipment. There were also office workers, archivists, inspectors and typists, who – managed by a German deportee, who answered to a civilian *Meister* – were forced to perform twelve-hour day or night shifts.

The large factory started operating in May 1944. Every day at 6:30 am, whatever the weather and even in the rain and snow, approximately 10,000 men grouped together in the square for the roll call, subdivided into work categories. For each group, one deportee held up a board with a number painted on it. To the sound of a band, they were made to parade at a

marching pace in groups of five up to the camp gates. They had to keep their arms flat against their bodies and resembled wooden puppets operated by a string; like robots with neither desire nor personality.

In front of the entrance, a dozen SS soldiers ambled about, ready to kick or slap anyone not marching in straight lines. Stretching along the procession, SS sentries kept watch every 50 metres to ensure no one fell out of line. Most of the deportees were dressed in rags stained with oil, rust and different colours, depending on the task each was assigned to do. Not forgetting that this single garment was never changed, which is why after several months, it turned into a colourless incrustation of fat and filth.

The victims of Nazi racial superiority marched pale faced, with sunken eyes, gaunt, gripped by an insatiable hunger and weakened by the paltry rations. The 10,000 men marched for twenty minutes and after travelling half a kilometre, they entered the tunnels, at the entrance to which, other SS officers counted the members of each group.

One hour later, the scene was repeated in the opposite direction: deportees from the other shift returned from work. They crossed through the gates at a marching pace and set to music,

and as soon as they broke ranks, they ran as fast as possible to their huts for the soup distribution, which was the only hot food they consumed all day. Then, exhausted due to exertion and fatigue, they collapsed on to their straw mattresses and slept to forget the nightmare of that hopeless existence.

## MONOTONOUS DAYS

Winter. 5 am. Pitch darkness. In the hut, where the three tiers of bunks are so close to one another that the space between them is only large enough for a person to pass through sideways. 130 men to 60 beds, as they sleep two or even three to a straw mattress. The room measures about 10 metres by 8. The air is hot, foul and humid, reeking of sweat, feet, dirty clothes and linen. Deafening snoring.

At 5:30 am comes the harsh ringing of a bell: a bullet case struck by a piece of wood. A few seconds later, the lights are switched on and a booming voice bawls, "*Aufstehen!*", "Get up!" With a start, the 130 men spring from their beds, lift up their straw mattresses and pull out their shoes (the only way to avoid them being stolen) and the foot wraps used for months without being changed or washed. They pull on

their striped trousers and the jacket that was also serves as a pillow and rush off to the washbasin, which consists of two circular fountains, each with six taps. They remove their shirt and jacket and wash themselves without soap as this is lacking three weeks each month. As for towels – 18 for 260 people – they are already dripping wet after the first people have used them. At the exit, a deportee hands out a token to those who have washed themselves, without which you may not obtain your ration. This drastic system was introduced because many were going without washing.

Half soaked and with ill-fitting trousers, the prisoners stand in line to receive their coffee substitute, which is sometimes boiling hot and sometimes cold and is necessary to rinse out the mouth with repeated gargling to relieve the dry throat due to the dust breathed in during the night: dust imprisoned in clouds due to all the moving blankets and the straw mattresses.

It has been one hour since the alarm sounded. Everyone is ready to go out. At 6:30 am further orders are bellowed: "*Ausgehen! Hinaus! Hinaus!*" "Out! Out!" Blows, kicks and a few slaps are handed out to anyone still smoking a thin cigarette made from newspaper in the latrines, which are fitted with eight 'toilets' in a row.

And so, on a pitch dark and freezing December morning, we fumble down a staircase made from bundles of brushwood, reaching the path that leads to the so-called roll call square. The stairs are covered in compact snow, on which our wooden-soled shoes slide at almost every step. It is a torment barely imaginable. To complete a journey which, with normal shoes and with good visibility would require not even eight minutes, under these conditions we need 20 to 25.

In the roll call square, you have to find your work group, referred to as the *Kommando* and line up with your companions in misfortune. There is another half hour's wait before everything is ready. Often, two or three arrogant SS youths, evacuated from Auschwitz concentration camp, find amusement walking among the groups of deportees, kicking or slapping those who are smoking or who are not stiffly aligned.

## PRETENDING TO WORK...

At 7 am the parade begins. The band starts playing one of the two marches it has learnt. The spotlights illuminate 8,000 human beings who no longer even appear human,



deformed as they are by suffering and the rags covering them. They march towards the gruelling work which awaits them, escorted by kapos and kapo assistants, who keep the rhythm by repeating: "*Eins, zwei, drei, vier!*". At the gate, each team stops and the kapos announce to grim-faced SS controllers: "Kommando n. 136 – twenty-six men" – "Kommando n. 92 – one hundred and ten men" – and so on.

At 7:30 am work commences. You have to dig channels in the frozen earth, an arduous task producing no results as the spade is unable to cut through the ice and the compact soil, which is like stone. The kapo notices this but nonetheless, forces the men to stay in their positions, perhaps pretending to work. Orders are orders. In the concentration camp, common sense does not exist, including when it comes to technical questions. The concentration camp is a place where deportees must suffer every hour of every day until they can endure no longer. And if they surrender, then – as I believe I have already mentioned – the crematory awaits them.

For a hole, which ten men should be able to dig in one day, at the concentration camp thirty men will be at work and the results will be those of ten: exhaustion and starvation have reduced their ability to work to this extent. They pretend to work from 7:30 am until noon.

The hours seem to drag on endlessly, especially with frozen hands and feet. They make furious strikes with the pickaxe to warm up, but a few minutes later they are out of breath and dizzy and are forced to slow down. It is not even possible to exchange a few words with your companions in misfortune. They are Polish, Gypsies and Ukrainians, almost all of whom are illiterate, and except for the most material aspects of life, would have little to talk about, even if we could understand them.

So, you withdraw inside yourself. During those endless hours, all you can do is relive memories from the past. You look back on your own existence, starting with your childhood and, as though contemplating a series of frames from a long film, you follow your own destiny, clutching at important warning signs.

Recognising mistakes you have made, you wish you could go back in time and start life over.

## A LOST SENSE OF THE HUMAN MEANING OF LIFE

*“Italiano, bewege dich!”* – “Italian man, move it!”. The assistant tears me from my haven of memories and forces me to dig. The life we are living is so inhumane that – I would say

almost luckily – there is no time to compare it with that crushing of your heart and soul caused by the Nazi barbarity, throwing us in a concentration camp like rubbish that can still be used for some lowly function. Only in the solitude of your own spiritual isolation can you find yourself again for a brief moment. You discover the bottom of the abyss into which you have fallen and you see the sky as a tiny blue opening, which is now far away and will remain inaccessible forevermore.

The human meaning of life has vanished, replaced by the beastly selfishness of a large mob, struggling to survive and this forces you to watch your own back. You cannot expect help from anyone and this animal-like atmosphere makes you feel even more alone, so you force yourself to forget that you are mixed up in the anonymous mob of men, who are your enemies and who are poised to steal from you the little you have to satisfy your hunger.

I remember how, one morning, while waiting for an order in a camp office, a little black and white cat appeared. It came towards me meowing, jumped on my lap and from there, on to my shoulder, purring immediately and rubbing its face on my neck, ears and forehead. I felt an unexpected deep sensation: after many months, I was once again feeling human

kindness – a feeling that in the Nazi concentration camps could only be produced by a little cat...

The *kapo* arrives. He is a German man who was serving a life sentence in prison. For a while he was in the French Foreign Legion. He is a dangerous madman with abnormal mood swings. He notices that the deportees are not working and orders them all to remove the light coat which is preventing them from moving freely. The temperature is seven degrees below zero and we are wearing almost summer clothing. We remove our coats, and, when the kapo leaves, we put them back on, rolling up the sides to make them seem more like a jacket.

It is snowing. Our cotton garments get wet. Deportees know that they will never be able to change clothes because they have only one set. So, they try to shelter themselves from the snow, even though they know that they risk getting hit across the shoulders or head or receiving a couple of slaps that will send them hurtling to the ground. You have to pray that God protects you from pneumonia, a disease which wreaks havoc inside the concentration camp because it goes untreated.

Luckily – and it is definitely appropriate to say – the air-raid alert sounds. Everyone seeks shelter in the closest hut. Finally, time to warm

up a little! However, if you don't find yourself in your own hut or one in which you know some people, you get thrown out by the others.

## HEART BREAKING MEMORIES

With regards to the Nazi psychology which deformed the deportees' mentality, I remember this episode. A distinguished French engineer, I believe from Marseille, was talking to a friend when the hut kapo or *Blockältester* (meaning the eldest man in the block) happened to walk by, smoking. The Frenchman asked him politely to light his cigarette for him. Without one moment's hesitation, the hut kapo gave him a vicious slap, saying, "How dare you ask me for a light? Get out of here!". This hut kapo was a German petty criminal who had reached the ranks of kapo at the camp.

When the air-raid siren didn't shorten the long working hours in the snow, work continued until noon. Then, the funereal camp bell would ring out, announcing half an hour's break. Half an hour's reprieve is hardly enough to rest tired legs and warm up limbs which have become numb due to the penetrating cold, which is felt even more so due to the lack of fat in our diets. During this half an hour, you can consider

yourself lucky if you take a few drags from a cigarette to calm your hunger a little. We are given nothing else to eat, having already received our 'meal' that morning.

The bell sounds again announcing that work is to resume. We set off slowly, dragging our feet, like someone headed to the gallows. Then we take back up the spade or shovel and we force ourselves to dig a few metres of earth, hard as the hearts of these hopeless people.

The air is grey. The atmosphere is grey. Low grey clouds rush through the sky, almost brushing the oaks and spruces on the hills surrounding the concentration camp. From time to time, the wind whips up a handful of dry leaves. The camp's paved roads are shining and deserted. All the deportees are at work. The tarmac on the roads brings to mind the streets in our cities. To our open, Latin minds, the abyss separating us from this heinous machine of death, devised by a perverted gang of opportunists seems immense, and we are unable to comprehend the mentality of the German deportees, who compete to exceed the brutality of their superiors.

You need to find a spiritual haven so as not to become beasts like them. I think back to my city and my loved ones with intense nostalgia. I think about my house, the result of

years of loving care that were needed to craft it as my childhood dream had imagined and a powerless fury shakes my core to think of the infamy which will remain engraved on these people, who have torn millions of men of all nationalities from their homes, to be imprisoned in huts like these, forcing them to carry out work unrelated to their aptitudes and physical capacities with the premeditated aim of causing their death and suffering.

## AMONG THE CORPSES IN THE CREMATORIUM

The crematorium chimney ejects a dense, blackish smoke which the wind blows back over the building and an undefinable odour spreads around the camp. Every day, dozens and dozens of corpses are reduced to a handful of black ashes, disposed of in a pit behind the crematorium. When the pit is full, another will be dug close by and a few shovelfuls of earth will suffice to cover the one which is already full. My thoughts drift to the sunny cemeteries in our cities, the care each flower-covered tombstone receives and the rest which must be found beneath the earth which saw you being born. Dying here means disappearing entirely.

Nothing will be left of you but the memories of those who loved us.

Each of these deportees had a house, a wife and children. He will remember the cosy nook in which he slept, his soft, warm bed. Now everything is far away and almost forgotten. The thread that maintains ties despite distance, the possibility to write and to receive news – all of this has been denied to us by this beast which is Nazism. Nostalgia causes us to suffer, but it also gives us the strength to survive in order to see the inevitable downfall of Nazi-fascism. This is the only certainty which sustains us physically and which comforts us enough to have faith in the future.

An SS soldier walks past. He must be about thirty and he watches us as we work. We all suddenly feign extraordinary zeal. The soldier walks over to a young Frenchman whose head is wrapped in a flannel body-belt because he is suffering from periostitis.

“Bag of shit!” – he screams – “You can’t work like that! Remove that scarf!”. The Frenchman attempts to explain that he is ill. The SS soldier brutally rips the bandage off the man’s face and throws it in the muddy snow. He walks away. The group kapo then rushes over and punches the Frenchman a couple of times, while screeching obscenities at him. When both



assailants have gone, it is the kapo assistant's turn to threaten the deportee with a further beating if he puts the scarf back on.

At around 4 pm we receive the order to stop the afternoon's digging work. We are led in columns to the hospital entrance. A lorry is parked in front with a trailer full of naked corpses. The Russians who work at the crematorium are already hard at work, but need extra man power. There are more than 200 corpses and the lorry has to leave as soon as possible.

With another deportee, I have to carry one of the stretchers on which two or even three bodies are loaded. I look at these wretched remains of men who were once free, working productively in their country and who are now reduced to skin and bone, weighing no more than 30 kilos. They are or rather, were, men aged between 30 and 45, who died in Dora's satellite camps: Ellrich, Nordhausen, Harzungen and Klein Bodungen.

Each of these men, too must have had a family, a mother, a wife and children, who are likely never to know what became of their loved one, from whom they have not received any news for months on end, that is, if they even knew that the latter had been deported. Two or three times a week, this lugubrious truckload

comes to a halt in front of the hospital, on its way to the crematorium.

At 5:30 pm work ends because at 6 pm all the deportees, divided per hut, must be ready in the square for the evening roll call. Once the stretcher with the last three bodies has been unloaded on top of the heap of other corpses, we wash our hands quickly and run to the square.

## 22 RUSSIANS HUNG

It was almost nightfall, but in the half-light, I was struck by the sight of a strange contraption being erected in the middle of the square. I quickly understood that it was gallows with seven nooses hanging from it in readiness. While waiting aligned for the roll call, another gallows was set up quickly with another seven nooses. The end of the day was turning out to be bleaker than ever. Spotlights were turned on to illuminate the scene ominously. When all the deportees were lined up in the square, the camp *Rapportführer's* voice boomed through the loud speakers. He said that by order of the minister of the Reich, Himmler, twenty-two deportees had been sentenced to execution by hanging for acts of sabotage and inciting sabotage.

This was the conclusion of a large-scale arrest made in November 1944. After three months of segregation in the SS prison bunkers, with half food rations, a group of Russians and Poles had come to the end of their period of suffering. The voice over the loud speaker read out the convicts' names and a short while later, the doomed to die, escorted by a handful of SS officers with rifles levelled, were made to walk to the base of the gallows. Thin and pale, due to the deprivation they had suffered, yet sure-footed, they proceeded towards the scaffold. The executioner was not an SS specialist, as one may have imagined, but rather a German criminal deportee, who had taken on this function.

The scene that followed will haunt me forever. The first group of men was made to climb on the platform. The noose was slipped over the convicts' necks. While awaiting the official's order to remove the stools, one of the Russians turned and shouted to them: "See you soon!" The hangman slapped him. The stools were then removed and after a few minutes of jolted movements, twelve corpses hung from the nooses. Then it was the turn of the remaining group, who had watched immobile as their companions were hung. This group also proceeded towards death serenely, without

hesitation or signs of weakness. After this episode, the roll call began for the rest of us. The bodies were removed from the nooses and transported to the crematorium by the deportees in charge of this sorry task. The roll call lasted an hour as usual and ended with the *Rapportführer* blasting out orders over the loud speaker:

- 1) From now on, Russians would be denied the weekly ration of four cigarettes;
- 2) It was forbidden to smoke during working hours;
- 3) Hut kapos and German deportees were urged to attend the recently established camp brothel more frequently, because it was not yielding a return, the prostitutes were getting bored and it was not 'moral' for them to be receiving bread without working.

Incredible yet true! Then the roll call ended with the word, "*musik*". The band played a cheerful march to the detainees, who, in columns of five, marched to their huts to finally receive their main meal of the day after such a long wait: hot soup.

## HYGIENE MEASURES

Not all deportees consumed the so-called evening meal at the same time. According to a

rota, those living together in two huts stayed behind in the square and were required to use the showers. This was a mere formality though, as without soap and a towel, bathing was of little use. In a large room, with a capacity of 50 people, 200 men got undressed, with heaps of clothes and under garments piled around the place, encouraging the spread of lice. Six skeletons – how else should they be called? – per shower, 240 per 40 showers for five minutes before returning to the changing rooms, where they dried off with a dirty shirt that hadn't been changed for two months and once dressed again, rushed off to make way for another group.

Finally, back in their hut, they had to wait another half an hour to receive their soup ration. Since there were not enough mess tins, you had to wait for one person to finish before using theirs. And usually there wasn't enough time to wash it. Once you received your ration, the only place to eat it in relative peace was on your straw mattress. The so-called mess hall was full of faster deportees, who, sitting or standing, were devouring their broth greedily.

Once the mess tins were washed and put back in their place, the entrance to the large hut and the latrines filled up with detainees smoking tiny cigarettes made from tobacco dust, wrapped in newspaper. By 8:30 pm most men were

already in bed, in particular to avoid an air-raid siren going off while they were still up. In that event, the electricity would be switched off and the entire camp would be plunged into total darkness. You would then have to move around, groping for your mattress in the dark. Once laying on the mattress, all that was left to do was to get settled in as best you could with your bed companion.

There was a time when there was one blanket for two people by order by the SS. However, if you forwent a bread ration, you could have an additional blanket that had to be hidden during the day beneath the mattresses. We fell asleep within a few minutes, as fatigue gained the upper hand over our thin and eternally starving bodies and deep sleep wrapped them in a merciful oblivion.

When you were infested with lice, you woke up in the dead of the night with a deep burning on the skin. This was due to the new born lice, greedily sucking your blood. Taking advantage of the lit stove, we tried to get our clothes close to the flames to kill as many of the insects as possible. It was a macabre sight to see dozens of thin, drowsy, naked men with their shirts in tatters, hovering around the stove in order to find a space and free themselves of the torture of the lice. This veritable torture lasted

42 days until the long-awaited order was given to disinfect the hut and its occupants.

In Germany, there is perhaps no foreign civilian, so-called free worker or prisoner of war, soldier or political deportee, who did not suffer this lice scourge and the practices designed to avoid the spread of typhus.

Except that at Dora, for example, during the winter, disinfection constituted a life-threatening risk due to the climatic conditions. The procedure was carried out in the evening, on an empty stomach and after twelve hours' work. Once the roll call was complete, deportees from two huts were brought together in the square and led – under the watch of the hut kapos and their assistants – to a covered shelter which contained a steam boiler for disinfecting clothing.

Close to the shelter, we were made to strip naked even when the thermometer read five below zero. "Make a single roll of your overcoat, hat and woollen clothing, if you have any, and roll up the other items separately!" This was the peremptory order given to us. Due to the cold, two of my friends caught bronchitis, while another caught pneumonia. This was the price to pay to sleep more peacefully at night.

## A DEPORTEE'S PSYCHOLOGY

Something which shocked me soon after my arrival at the concentration camp, was the hostility which each deportee felt towards new arrivals and the brutal methods used by the hut kapos and their helpers to treat these newcomers; almost always for no good reason. I wished to discover the reason for this from a German block kapo, who had been detained for being a member of the communist party and who should therefore have been able to give me an explanation. I began, "here, we are all pretty much conscious victims of the Nazi barbarity, so in theory we should all unite around a common idea and I cannot comprehend this continued tormenting of detainees, which also happens at your hands, all the slapping, kicking and absurd prohibitions, obliging them to go to bed before it's time, depriving them of tobacco and refusing them additional rations".

He replied, "you have only been here for seven months; but if you had been stuck in here for four or seven years, you would be just like us. You still haven't forgotten the free life you enjoyed in your country. We have changed, due to pressure by the SS, so to hang on to our privileged positions as hut kapos, we have to obey and even exceed the orders we are given. After a while, you end up losing the meaning of



what it is to be human and you get used to beating people for any trivial matter. In a concentration camp, every incident is envisioned according to a different, abnormal and inhuman perspective. Our sense of humanity evaporates, like haze in the sun. All that remains for us is material well-being, which we have to defend tooth and nail from the jealousy and ploys of others, who are waiting to take our place. So, we are obliged to overplay our zealotry by being increasingly abusive towards the deportees”.

As a consequence, deportees who are treated in this harsh manner, in turn become violent, unscrupulous tyrants with regards to weaker detainees and newcomers, perpetuating, in this way, an atmosphere of continuous fear, suspicion and insecurity for one's own safety. A typical example of this brutality involved hut kapo Silla, a Czech man, despite his Italian-sounding name. This robust 24-year-old typographer, took pleasure, for any minor matter, in slapping elderly deportees of any nationality, who were exhausted after their 12 hours of hard labour.

His favourite prank was to throw packets of chewing tobacco randomly among the detainees to enjoy watching the ensuing brawls that broke out. At other times, he pretended he

was going to give an additional portion of soup to a group in line, mess tin in hand and when it was their turn, he chased them away shouting, "this isn't for you!". His example was faithfully reproduced by his subordinates, who handed out insults and refusals of all kinds to the unfortunate detainees, making life in the hut ever-more intolerable. How and to whom could we have complained?

## ARROGANCE AND UNDERHAND DEALINGS

Belonging to the same party, a person's political persuasion, things which were recognised in Buchenwald as a duty to help one's companion, meant nothing in the hell that was Dora. A French communist, who worked in Buchenwald as an office typist, was being transferred to Dora and was put in touch with a German comrade, who was departing on the same convoy for the same destination; a certain Eugenio Wallner from Stuttgart, who had been held in various concentration camps for the last eight years.

When they arrived at Dora, each of them went their own way and for several months, the two heard nothing of each other. In the meantime, the Frenchman had found a typist position in an

office run by an Austrian SS officer, a certain F. Wieser, an engineer sent to Dora in 1944 to oversee the camp's construction work. Working with the Frenchman was a Russian engineer, a French architect and a Belgian delivery man, who had all been deported in order to carry out specific tasks. The men shared a special bond of friendship.

Two months later, Wallner turned up to work in the office. With his overbearing manner and arrogance, a few days later, he had appointed himself group leader, leading to the SS officer reasserting to the deportees that the office boss was him and no one else. Chomping at the bit, Wallner then took it out on the French typist, exclaiming that he was a German first and foremost before being a communist. Influencing the hidden levers of the so-called concentration camp freemasonry and with help from the German common criminals who worked at the labour office, not only did he make the Frenchman's life impossible, but he also managed to have him transferred and assigned to the most gruelling excavation position, although the chief has assigned him to lighter tasks. He made the mistake of not showing his documents and drawings without an order from the officer. And by the start of February, his victim started working in the

snow, rain and wind and continued to do so until the downfall of the 'Great Reich'.

The whole of camp life was secretly woven with these hidden plots. Unintelligible and inexplicable reasons linked German common criminals to political prisoners and to other deportees of different nationalities. It was a well-known fact that when a kapo had a young, strapping typist from Russia, Poland or the Ukraine, they were having a secret homosexual relationship.

A Czechoslovakian political deportee, who, in his own country had been a Gestapo informer and thanks to whose tip off, fourteen Czech patriots had been shot, enjoyed utmost respect in the camp and wielded considerable influence especially over the German criminal kapos. No one had managed to explain the exact source of this influence. These murky dealings were only revealed when the camp was liberated and one of his fellow countrymen, who knew of his wrongdoings, reported him to the British Commander, who handed him over to the Czech authorities.

News of the Russian offensive, which began in mid-January 1945, with the rapid advance of the armoured divisions which had deeply penetrated the German formation, caused the reaction you might imagine at the

camp. To our great joy, we noticed an ill-concealed anxiety even among the SS, an anxiety which gave rise to ever-harsher and more restrictive measures with regards to the deportees.

As a result of the advance, there was an exodus from Upper Silesia of Italian soldiers who were building parts of the V-1 in a factory in Forst and that of Jewish survivors of Auschwitz concentration camp. Nordhausen, in the heart of Thuringia, on the slopes of the Harz mountains, and Dora with its underground workshops, represented the safest area in Germany for Himmler, as they were the same distance from the Western and Easter Fronts, as well as boasting a hilly terrain which offered an efficient defence mechanism. It is for this reason that thousands of men were sent here, while machinery of all sorts came pouring into the underground tunnels.

## THE MEN FROM AUSCHWITZ

On a cold Sunday at the start of February, the loudspeakers gave the order that all nurses and the strongest team members working on digging channels n° 1 and n° 2, should come to the roll call square together with the kapos,

deputy kapos and assistants. All inmates, on the other hand, were to stay in their huts, leaving the camp clear. Clearly a significant new arrival was expected.

From the huts located on the hillside, we quickly began to see, on the main road from Salza, a long, dark line which looked like an endless snake and which appeared almost immobile on the ribbon of asphalt, but which, when examined more closely, was actually a mass of people moving extremely slowly.

It took over an hour for the first men to arrive at the entrance of the camp and to organise themselves into groups of one hundred in the square. Only then did that muddled mass begin to be clearly defined. It was made up of swaying, gaunt beings, dressed in civilian clothes, blackened by coal dust. A few minutes after coming to a halt, many of them collapsed on the ground, overcome by fatigue and weakness. Along the way, black heaps had fallen by the side of the road; these were deportees in the throes of death.

Those wretched pieces of tormented flesh continued to arrive for more than an hour. They were now indifferent to everything. Meanwhile, stretcher bearers had moved in to collect the dead and to take them to the crematorium, while those in the first group of one hundred

were sent to the area with a projecting roof for disinfection. Forcing himself to keep walking, one prisoner collapsed and two friends held him under the arms, trying to support him in vain. Dragging him along with motionless legs trailing in the freezing snow, they carried him for a few dozen metres, until his trousers fell off and he slipped to the floor. The two companions looked at him with stupefaction before a camp deportee covered him with a tattered cloth.

There were approximately 4,000 men in total, all of whom had been evacuated two weeks earlier from Auschwitz. They had travelled for thirteen days, one hundred and ten per open cattle wagon. From Poland, they had been sent to Mauthausen concentration camp and from there to Buchenwald, before ending their journey at Dora. They had not eaten for thirteen days. When they arrived at Salza station, more than 700 were found dead in the railway wagons. Along the way from the station to the camp, another 150 died.

The SS, who were escorting these beings resembling men, forced them to keep walking by kicking and punching them. It was like beating the dead. Incapable of reacting, they continued to drag their trembling legs, or else collapsed when shoved or punched. Between 4 pm and 8 pm another 156 died in the roll call

square from hunger and exhaustion. Neither strength nor hope kept them connected to life. Only death could take pity on them now.

## A TERRIFYING BLAZE

Sent to be disinfected after thirteen days without food! The German organisation was both unalterable and merciless. Even these living corpses had to be disinfected, shaved, showered, dressed in the striped blue and grey cotton uniform and sent to the handling huts. After which they could be given 400 grams of bread and 20 grams of margarine.

The survivors' disinfection was completed by 10 pm, but in the meantime, another 80 had died. The following day, tossed in the mud in front of the handling hut, were the naked bodies of 28 men who had died during the night. And every morning for fifteen days, dozens of bodies were stacked up on the pavement at the hut entrance.

The crematorium lacked the capacity to incinerate such a high number of bodies, which is why exceptional measures were called for. A bonfire was built at the entrance of the camp. A few thousand deportees were ordered to prepare the necessary logs, while others were made to



collect the bodies which were laying in heaps at the various collection points.

The log bed measured 25 metres squared. On top of the logs around *vierzig Stück* or 'forty pieces', as the SS referred to them, were lined, legs to head. Then there was another log bed with another 40 bodies and so on.

Doused in petrol, the bonfires soon started to blaze. The burning piles made an upsetting sight. During the night, the flames illuminated the corpses. As the bodies were licked by the flames, the limbs moved, the stomach swelled and the skin exploded. The popping of the burning wood blended with the inexpressible noises of the boiling bodies. Contemplating this ghastly sight, it seemed we were living in a nightmare, observing pyres lit by primitive tribes to placate some cruel and destructive deity.

But the culmination of horror came when an air raid siren went off. The SS ordered the fires to be extinguished. Hundreds of buckets of water were thrown on the fires, releasing a cloud of nauseating steam. However, it was all to no avail because two smouldering fires ended up relighting the gloomy February night. The surrounding spruce trees dropped a few green spindles on that macabre pile, which was eradicating those unhappy souls from the earth, and also perhaps from the memory of the living

and they were finally allowed to rest in peace.

## DORA CAMP HOSPITAL

As I think I have already mentioned, to be admitted to Dora camp hospital, you had to have gaping or purulent wounds or a fever higher than 38.5 degrees. In winter, the medical visit required for admission turned into a risk-filled torment. The admission room was located in a hut in which patients were made to strip naked, roll their clothes up as per usual and place them on the muddy or snow-covered floor. Naked and lined up in single file, the sick shivered with cold. With pale faces, skeleton-like bodies and swollen ankles, they brought to mind the dead bodies stacked up at the crematorium.

The medical visit could not have been more perfunctory: a thermometer was applied and a few questions were asked. The doctors – who were also deportees – showed understandable sympathy towards their fellow countrymen. When a patient was admitted, he was made to have a hot shower immediately. While his clothes were being disinfected, the patient – with his registration number written in copying pencil on one leg – was accompanied, still naked

with a blanket over his shoulders, to the department assigned to him: that is another hut 400 metres from the casualty department and located on a hillside.

Leading to the various huts used as annexes was a path, which had originally been made unusable due to the viscous mud, and which was now covered in bundles of brushwood. Walking on it bare foot or with wooden-soled shoes was no easy feat. But that walk in the cold – in the sadistic Nazi mentality – may have been planned purposefully, taking advantage of the patients' likelihood of catching pneumonia. Our experiences led us to suspect that this was in fact the case.

The inside of the hospital was not very different from that of the other huts: bunk beds and half empty straw mattresses. The only difference was that a white and blue sheet was attached to the mattress and another identical sheet was attached to the cover. The sheets, however, were seldom changed so patients had to climb beneath sheets which had been used by another deportee who had been discharged or who had died only a few hours previously.

When there was a high influx of patients, the latter were made to share a bed. Treatment consisted of bed rest, electric heating pads, infrared radiation, a few aspirin tablets, atthofan

and Epsom salts, depending on the illness. Those suffering from an edema received two Vitamin C tablets. Rations remained unchanged. And this was the entire arsenal of treatment options for internal diseases.

The use of local or general anaesthetic was unheard of in the operating theatre. Amputations of arms or legs were carried out without general anaesthetic. Most people undergoing operations died. Bandages were fashioned from strips of crepe paper and swabs were made from the same material. In the dormitories, the air was impregnated with the stench of purulent equipment from the incurable edema wards, filled with people suffering from malnutrition and vitamin deficiency.

Patients with a fever were discharged after a few days. Those with tuberculosis, pleurisy and dysentery were given a special diet made up of oat or aspic based soup. Many of these sick men provided convincing proof that diseases can be cured on their own when the body's defences are able to take effect and when the patient has the will to get better! Rest alone was enough to bring about a beneficial result among those who were still responsive. Those no longer responsive died.

But the truth is that in German

concentration camps, life had no value at all. Whether 10 or 100 died each day, the problem was easy to resolve: a series of telegrams were sent to the SS in Berlin. In order to replace the dead, other SS officers set up blockades in any Italian city, made roundups, cleared out the prisons, sifted through the 'goods' which had been collected, organised a convoy of 500-1,000 human beings and locked them up in one of the numerous concentration camps. Similar to apocalyptic blood-thirsty monsters, these places were never satiated by all the healthy, robust men they received, transforming them within a few months into living skeletons. 'Usable goods' – as they were referred to – which were eliminated through hunger, exhaustion or an injection designed to liberate the soul from a body.

## THE CREMATORIUM

I feel I must speak once more about the crematorium. This was erected on the hillside overlooking the camp, in the hospital huts enclosure, with its five-metre-high, rectangular chimney stack, which spewed out smoke without interruption day and night. Every deportee cast a glance at least once a day at that

chimney, which spat out a dense, black, almost oily smoke, spreading black ash over the camp mixed with whitish flakes: the cartilage and bones of the dead.

One day, during the roll call, a Russian man grasped from the air a handful of the ash containing white flakes and showed it to his friend saying: "Look, this is our friend!". He was referring to one of their friends who had died a few days earlier at the hospital, after receiving 50 cane strikes on his naked body for stealing a loaf of bread from a transportation wagon.

With the onset of war, crematoriums had become institutions of the highest order, not only in the concentration camps, but throughout Germany. They greatly simplified the work of the Reich's gravediggers. With the millions of Jews, Poles, Russians, Czechs, French deportees or prisoners, civilian or forced labourers, mentally deficient Germans, those who died from deprivation or sent to the gallows, those executed by firing squad, those sent to the gas chambers and those killed with injections of toxic chemicals for experimental purposes, finding somewhere to bury all of those bodies would have been a mammoth task requiring a significant number of gravediggers, at a time when all able-bodied men were at the front. Therefore, crematoriums enormously facilitated

this task and a simple set of records substituted countless cemeteries with millions of graves and crosses.

Crematorium workers, under the direct leadership of a member of the SS corps, received special treatment: they received plentiful rations, cigarettes and satisfactory clothing; making them a privileged *kommando*. But there is another side to every coin as we heard that, sooner or later, crematorium workers ended up on their own gridiron, since the Nazis did not want such witnesses of their barbarity to live to tell the tale.

The SS corps regularly ordered golden crowns to be removed from the teeth of the dead. Moreover, we heard that in the last few months prior to defeat, people were set alight when still in the throes of death, reduced to that state by the inhumane treatment they had suffered.

To typify the criminal Nazi mentality, it is interesting to notice how they obtained the elements required to use as a legitimate alibi when necessary. Apart from a furnace, the crematorium included a large, well-lit room with an autopsy table, wash basins for physicians, changing rooms and everything required for post-mortems.

At Dora, however, the SS doctor

appointed for this purpose, did not carry out one single autopsy for 24,000 deaths! Yet the cement table for dissections, just like the orderly arrangement of huts, embellished by well-tended gardens surrounding them, was meant to show any visitors that everything was being carried out in accordance with conventional standards.

Even the cinema, the evening brothel trips and the football games were a pretence, aimed at whitewashing the prisoners' treatment. Who knows what Himmler's plans really were when he decided to build Dora in 1942. Only one thing is sure: once they crossed the threshold of the concentration camp, a ruthless fate awaited the enemies of Nazism: decay, exhaustion, withering and death.

## AGITATION...

In March 1945, life at the concentration camp was shaken by a series of occurrences, which to an experienced spectator of empire collapses, gave the clear sensation that the end was imminent. The agitation of the SS men was transmitted to the kapos and deputy kapos, and as a result, the situation became ever-harsher. For four days, there was no bread; it was



substituted by 300 grams of potato, the soup was less substantial and for six days we also went without margarine. Everyone was suffering from hunger and we were unable even to steal half a litre of broth or a couple of raw potatoes.

Air raid alerts came day and night. At Salza station, the first aircraft gun fire was recorded against locomotives and civilian workers by British planes. For the first time, Nordhausen was bombed. These events, witnessed by us deportees, signified that the war had now shifted to the heart of Germany.

From the beginning of March, the camp commander decided to stop distributing the German High Command war bulletin. A few civilians, who secretly listened to the allied radio stations, assured us that the Siegfried Line had now been bypassed, the Rhine had been crossed and many armoured columns had thrust deeply into central Germany. This news, despite the hunger and harshness of the manual labour, gave us the courage and the strength to go on, helping us to hope for a swift end to our suffering.

Meanwhile, the hangings were coming in unusually rapid succession. It was clear that the camp commander intended to prevent the escape of those individuals accused of sabotage, who had been arrested one month earlier on

vague charges. In just ten days, there were three mass public executions, two in the roll call square and one in the underground tunnels.

Further convoys of deportees arrived, after being evacuated from the concentration camps of Gross Rosen (Wrocław) and Upper Silesia, with a repeat of the now well-known horrific scenes: heaps of dead bodies, pyres burning corpses and ashes being buried. A diabolic rage seemed to have taken hold of the SS in charge of Dora.

## **NO MORE "HEIL HITLER!"**

One day, a new deportee arrived at the camp: he was a tall, robust-looking sixty-year-old German man. Until a few days previously, he had worked on the other side of the tunnels, as the kapo of a group of civilian workers. One evening, after listening to the war bulletin which indicated that Kassel was about to fall, he commented on the news using the following words: "If we continue the war like this, instead of Heil Hitler! we will soon have to go back to Good day! and Good evening!".

When word got back to the Gestapo, he was arrested, dressed publicly in the grey and blue deportee's uniform and transported to the

camp. Since he was added to my group, in charge of channel digging, I wanted to find out the opinion about the general situation of this man, who until a few days previously, had been able to read the newspapers relatively freely.

This is how I discovered that, in his opinion, Germany could only hold out six weeks longer, which is why he was not overly worried about being imprisoned. I told him that he was probably the last deportee to come to Dora, which represented a significant event for the history of the camp. And it is true that after his arrival, there were no new arrivals.

After this came Easter. It is worth pointing out that no Catholic festivities were observed. Only for Christmas was a large spruce tree erected. Among the detainees there were several Protestant pastors and a few Catholic priests, whose presence was only known to a few people. And while for most inmates, Easter went unobserved, these men came together in small groups in a remote corner of the camp and received holy communion with the remnants of a host, brought by a priest.

I will always remember 1 April 1945. It was a hot, sunny day. You could smell spring in the air. The pine trees, spruces and oaks were already covered in a green coat of new leaves. Until 1 pm, I worked building the bed of a road,

which now stretched most of the way to the crematorium. Along the edge of the road, primroses and the first forget-me-nots were in bloom.

From the hut, which served as an operating theatre, there suddenly came agonising screams, which unsettled that serenity for half an hour. Then the screams ceased completely and a hospital attendant carried a leg out of the hut, which he placed in the crematorium entrance.

## CLOSED IN THE HUTS

In the afternoon, we did not work. I withdrew to the hillside, on the edge of a small oak wood, which afforded views over the Harz mountains, with Nordhausen stretching out at their feet. The silence of that place made me think of Christ's torment for the salvation of the whole of humanity and this thought instilled in me the certainty that our torment too would result in freedom and peace for all.

I thought about my family, of which I had had no news for many months. I prayed for our country to be spared the horrors of defeat, since the Nazis, to take revenge for their quashing, were unquestionably going to destroy whatever

they could. I prayed for Trieste, which was still so far away from the British and American troops and that God would protect us from the reprisals of the SS, which I was certain would occur.

For a few months, there had been plans to erect above the concentration camp entrance, two new towers connected by a walkway, on which to position four machine guns. The project had been ready since January, but works could not begin due to a lack of equipment. To make up for this shortcoming, the two existing towers at each side of the entrance were armed with machine guns. This arrangement was highly significant to all the deportees, as from the towers the SS could spray the entire roll call square and the 20,000-people gathered there with bullets.

On 2 April, we learnt news that filled our hearts with joy: during the night in the tunnel offices, all the archives, designs and plans needed to assemble and produce the V-1 and V-2 had been burnt, on the orders of the civil engineers. The military defence in the west had now been crushed and the cry, "every man for himself!" had been launched.

On 4 April at 6:30 am, while all the deportees were getting ready to go to work as usual, the loud speaker voice boomed the

following order: “all external and internal commands of the camp, including the tunnel commands, are to remain in their huts”. That morning we had received neither bread nor margarine, which is why that order, which was without precedent in the history of the camp, led us to believe that the day would be decisive for us. At no time since the camp was founded, were the deportees not sent to work at 6:30 am.

## **TIME TO GO!**

What was the comando plotting against its grey and blue ‘enemies’, who were about to regain their freedom? I agreed with a student from Trieste, Carlo Slama, the only Italian in my hut, to stay together and to pay attention to what was going to happen. At around 9 am, the air raid sirens sounded the alarm and just after, in the sky above Dora there appeared hundreds of planes which had just bombed Nordhausen. After an hour, the all-clear signal was given.

At 10:30 am the loud speaker voice ordered all the deportees to collect a mess tin and a blanket and to go to roll call square.

It was time to go! We were now all certain of this. But where to? Towards salvation and freedom or towards our deaths?

The camp was in turmoil, the terroristic organisation had vanished, as if by magic. In the roll call square, a fire was burning thousands and thousands of pages from the archives held in the labour office. They recorded the names of all the detainees who had passed through Dora, those who had worked there, suffered at the hands of the harsh regime or who had left for another destination, as well as many who had returned to Dora in the corpse wagon for cremation.

The hut used to store the deportees' personal belongings, i.e. the clothing they were wearing on that day which now seemed so long ago, when they first arrived at the camp, was stormed and not on the initiative of the detainees, but following an order given by the SS commander to redistribute the clothing packages; including those of the dead. Only a few thousand prisoners benefitted from this redistribution. Probably they wished to create an alibi for the disappearance of the valuable items: watches, gold rings, large sums of money and other belongings, which had been confiscated upon arrival and carefully recorded in the personal files of each individual.

Meanwhile, in another hut nearby, they were handing out more striped clothing and underwear, towels, socks, woollen pullovers,

scarves and so on. It was the first time we had seen this huge quantity of brand new woollen clothing, which revealed another aspect of the Nazi cruelty: in the dead of winter, they had refused to distribute pullovers to detainees, on the pretext that they had run out, obliging the men to work outdoors wearing only a shirt, a smock and a coat, which led to thousands dying prematurely of bronchial pneumonia.

## GOODBYE FOREVER DORA!

The loud speakers started barking once again: "*Achtung! Achtung!*" "Everyone must get in columns of five and go to the food supply hut!". By 11:30 am, hundreds of deportees were in front of the food stores, where each one received an 800-gram tin of meat and a loaf of bread weighing 1.6 kg. The food distribution was, in itself, a sign that we were to embark on a long journey. In groups of 120 they were then made to leave the camp.

This uninterrupted parade of men of all ages, thin, emaciated and pale with sunken eyes and without luggage, apart from a haversack made from sacking and a cover draped over their shoulders, lasted until 4:30 pm. Around 4,000 detainees in total departed from the camp. The



German nationals, around 1,300 of them, formed a separate column and were led off in a different direction.

That evening, the huts looked like houses which had been abandoned in a great hurry under enemy pressure. It was difficult to pass through the corridors, which were obstructed by mattresses that had been ripped open, cardboard boxes, pierced mess tins and refuse of all kinds. Discipline was now a distant memory. Those left behind slept on more comfortable beds and could finally stretch out alone on a straw mattress, wrapped up in two blankets.

The next morning, the wakeup call came at 6:30 am. The loud speaker ordered all remaining detainees in the camp to go to the roll call square at 7:30 am. It was a cloudy day. A fine drizzle penetrated the men's cotton coats and soaked them to the bone. Just like the day before, the inmates were organised into groups of 120 and each group left the camp accompanied by four SS soldiers armed with machine guns.

For the first time, I perceived the road that led to the opening of the V-1 and V-2 assembly tunnels. Passing the threshold of the world which I had known up until that point, I had the chance to notice the enormous concentration of equipment, machinery, railway

wagons, cranes and spare parts for the V-2, this secret weapon, on which the Nazis had pinned such high hopes and which had been a source of great disappointment for its creators. As a result of which, there had been a mass hanging of deportees, who had been blamed for the inefficient missiles, under the general accusation of sabotage.

## TOWARDS THE UNKNOWN

We arrived at the station and I managed to board an open-top wagon on the long train which was already loaded with deportees. There were 120 of us in total and we barely had enough room to stand up straight, pressed against one another. I think I was the only Italian man among Poles, Czechs, Jews and about fifty Frenchmen. As luck would have it, most of the Frenchmen were common criminals, extracted from Parisian prisons and sent to forced labour camps in Germany.

The railway convoy, made up of approximately forty wagons, set off at around 2 pm for a destination unbeknownst to us. I was finally able to see during the day, the parts of those hills which I had caught a glimpse of for the first time when I arrived, on a stormy, rainy

and blustery night.

I noticed the exits of the tunnels, halfway up the hillside overlooking Salza station, the *Ammoniak* factory, the concentration camp for German workers and the houses of local peasants, who we considered to be living free and happy lives.

We travelled all afternoon. As we passed through Ellrich, we saw the death camp being erected there. We could also observe deportees being evacuated, as we had been from Dora. Later in the day, we arrived in Nordheim. Our train was heading towards Hannover or Hamburg or perhaps even further north; while my heart was yearning for the sunny south and I wished that we would turn southwards towards Bavaria, so that we might draw closer to Italy.

After Nordheim, the train came to a halt in the middle of the countryside. It was raining. We tried to protect ourselves the best we could by wrapping ourselves in our blankets. We heard that the convoy would not be able to make further progress because the railway line had been bombed that morning. So, we spent the night there, in the rain, in an open-top wagon, in a standing position, pressed up against the next prisoner. We must have looked like a group of exhausted wretches, immobile and petrified.

**STANDING FOR FOUR DAYS**

I think I managed to sleep in that position for several hours. At a certain point, I opened my eyes and was consoled by the sight of a pink and blue dawn, shortly followed by rays of sunlight which shone through from behind the woods. We remained there until noon. As the sun rose from the horizon, it warmed us a little and dried our blankets.

When the train finally set in motion, we passed through a station which had been bombed the day before. All the railway installations had been destroyed; the tracks had been torn off and twisted and dozens and dozens of wagons had been overturned and set ablaze. The train passed over tracks which had been hastily repaired during the night.

We had only been travelling for a day. I would have to spend another four unending days like this one. The nights were terrifying; fatigue meant that we were not able to hold ourselves upright and the weaker among us collapsed between the legs of the others. Since the ration that had been distributed at Dora, we had not been given any more food. After the third day, I started to suffer from stomach cramps caused by hunger.

After Nordheim, we arrived in Celle, where we stayed from 1 pm to 7 pm. There was an air-

raid siren. Hundreds of Flying Fortresses sliced through the sky. We were at the mercy of fate, as a convoy of over 40 railway wagons made a very conspicuous target.

There was heavy railway traffic at Celle station. Trains heading for Hamburg were passing through. They were mainly transporting soldiers and officials. Suddenly, a fighter plane nose-dived, dropping two small bombs which exploded in an area of damp ground about fifty metres from us. We were all so exhausted that most did not even realise what had happened. Towards evening, we set off again for an unknown destination.

That night, the Frenchmen stole items from my haversack, which contained very few objects of interest to them: a spoon, twine, a pair of gloves and a handkerchief. However, that haversack also contained something of immeasurable worth to me: the only two letters that I had received from home and the manuscript of a book which was already finished: "Twenty-five years of mountaineering", in which I described how my love of mountains was born; a book pervaded by a feeling of nostalgia, which I would never be capable of repeating, as the misery of prison had dictated pages to me which I would never again be able to write.

I asked them to return the manuscript, in vain. During the night, I noticed a few pages on the ground, covered in mud and charcoal. A Frenchman threatened to hit me if I didn't stop accusing them and called me a fascist – "I wouldn't be here if I was!" – I replied. He retorted that Italy had stabbed France in the back while it was bearing the brunt of Germany's belligerence. I tried to make him understand that one thing was a fascist dictatorship in the government and another was the Italian people, who had never wanted to go to war. He then suggested that we make peace. But it was just words.

## INTOLERABLE AGONY

It must have been midnight. The train came to a halt in the countryside, on the edge of a dense spruce forest. It was pitch black and a few stars shone brightly in the night sky. Far away, towards north, we could make out blazing fires. At intervals, we heard ten minutes of intense bombing which suddenly stopped. Then there was total silence. From time to time, planes dropped brightly lit rockets, illuminating areas of darkness.

We spent three days and nights in this

manner, immobile, on foot, without food, deprived of cigarettes and with small quantities of dirty water to drink; as we eagerly awaited each dawn, warming ourselves every afternoon in the April sun and anxiously bidding farewell as the flaming sunset heralded the onset of night.

At night, the torment was intolerable. Some of us crouched. Others tried to follow suit but there was barely one centimetre of free space. After several hours, those on foot, fell exhausted onto those who were crouching. Here and there scuffles broke out, with insults shouted back and forth in Polish, Russian, French and German. The two SS guards, who, every two hours exchanged places in the brakesman's cabin, threatened to shoot unruly deportees dead with their machine guns.

The fourth day was spent very much like the previous days; however, our apathy had begun to grow, we were indifferent to everything. We had not eaten for four days. During a stop in the countryside, the first few dozen corpses were unloaded; men who had died of exhaustion. Thirty-two more were abandoned along the tracks. Who buried them? Who were they? No one made a record of their names or registration numbers. Their loved ones will never know what became of them.

In some of the wagons, dysentery gave rise to unspeakable situations. During the journey, we were not allowed to disembark without permission from the SS, which was very difficult to obtain, so piles of grass were placed in each wagon to serve as toilets. You can imagine the scene and the consequences in those overloaded surroundings, until the next stop.

## HALLUCINATION

On the fifth night, I could resist no longer. At a certain moment – it must have been about 11 pm or perhaps 2 am – my legs gave way and I collapsed on the floor or on someone who was already lying there. Still today I don't fully understand what happened. I just remember – it must have been an unconscious vision – that I was, like the previous nights, in a line, leaning against the shoulders of my neighbour. I even remember confused shouting in French, Polish and German. Much to my surprise, I distinguished one single voice uttering a few words in Italian.

Just then, someone grabbed my arms, while another went through my trouser pockets, extracting a worthless empty tin container and accusing me of theft. I started laughing because I



had found that object on the floor during a train stop. The three or four men accusing me exchanged a few words under their breath, then one of them exclaimed: "for the theft you have committed, you have been sentenced to death! Follow us!".

Three men stood by my sides and slapping and punching me, forced me to get out of the wagon and follow them at a fast pace. But straight after, I had the impression that I was boarding a different railway wagon, which immediately set in motion. I protested and called out for help, but more punches to my face caused me to stay quiet.

It felt as though I travelled for several hours. I had the impression I was alone with my three guards on a wagon travelling slowly into the night. I attempted to arouse pity in my jailers, telling them that by dawn I had to be at Dora for the roll call in order to start work, but they silenced me with another round of punches.

Then, at a moment, I seemed to be descending into a kind of ditch, in which countless men were lying in a deep sleep. There was no room for me to position my feet and I was surprised at how fast my guards seemed to be walking. The three men ordered me to stop and I slid to the ground. I think I slept for a

short time. I was awoken by sneers, laughter and moaning. I focused on the voices, surprised that they were not anguished screams, but rather exclamations of pleasure. I then had further confirmation of what I had often heard in Buchenwald and in Dora, about the pervasiveness of homosexual activity. Even in those desperate situations, this debauched vice, intensified by abstinence, was occurring in an unrestrained fashion.

## THE HALLUCINATION CONTINUES

While I attempted to peer through the darkness in the direction of the voices, one of my jailers declared that due to the generosity of his boss, I was to be set free at dawn. I silently thanked God for saving me in this particular moment of misfortune and swiftly fell asleep.

My wife appeared in my dreams, urging me to hang on a little more and explaining that my suffering would soon come to an end. She told me that we would go to see our friends who lived in Cortina d'Ampezzo and that I would quickly get over my malnutrition and pain. She added that I should take example from her willpower and her sacrificial nature, which had made it possible for her, a woman on her own,

to come to Germany to track me down and to give me a few words instilled with faith and hope.

The day was dawning when I found myself back with my usual travel companions, at a standstill in a station which I thought I had already seen two or three days earlier. My limbs were aching, my face and coat were soiled with blood. While I cleaned myself with a tattered handkerchief, I noticed a deportee dressed in civilian clothing, whom I had not seen in the days gone by. I tried to draw closer to him and he spoke to me in Italian, which surprised me greatly because until that moment, I thought I was the only Italian in the wagon.

I looked at him intently and noticed that he had a look of my wife about him. I felt as though she had come in disguise to reach me and to speak to me. After a while, when my bewilderment had subsided, I asked the stranger if he had any 'national' cigarettes. When he said no, there was no longer any doubt that he was my wife, as she would never have set off on a journey without a good supply of cigarettes.

After a few hours, my ideas became clearer and I convinced myself that it must have been a hallucination, that everything I have recounted was a dream, an unconscious vision which happened after I fainted. But there was

one thing I could not explain however: the very real bruising to my face from the slaps and punches I had received during the night...

## AT BELSEN

On the fifth day, we passed through Celle (Hannover) once more. The day before, we had arrived in the suburbs of Hamburg, but a counter order meant that we had to set off again southwards. At 3 pm on 9 April, the train came to a halt at the tiny station of Belsen, a place that we had never heard of, but which we soon discovered was a town home to an enormous concentration camp for Jews, political deportees and prisoners of war and the headquarters of the training centre for tank drivers of the Hannover Division, founded in 1936.

The SS sentries, who had disembarked from the train, ordered us to line up in groups of five on the platform for the roll call. We were all now without belongings. The few of us who had any when we set off, had lost them during the first few days of the journey to voracious thieves.

Like robotic skeletons, waxen, stained with coal and soot, which had accumulated over the five unending days on the railway wagon, the

deportees organised themselves into groups of five. Each group left behind two or three men who were unable to stand up. For a length of over half a kilometre, several thousand men, whose physical resistance had been stretched to the very limits, formed a row of filthy wretches.

We received the order to go and the column slowly set in motion. Those unable to walk remained on the platform, along with those who had been unloaded dead from the railway wagons.

While most of the men walked at a slow, dragging pace along a wide paved road, the soldiers noted down the registration numbers of those no longer able to move and assassinated them with a pistol shot to the neck. Half way, our column came across another group made up of Hungarian Jews, men, women and children, who had been rounded up six months before in Budapest and were now being transferred elsewhere.

Along the way, I noticed many camps: one for French prisoners, one for Russian prisoners and the infamous Belsen concentration camp for Jews and political detainees. After walking for more than six kilometres, our column entered the Wehrmacht's barracks. This fact gave us the precise sensation that we had come to the end. For deportees to be housed in the barracks of

the German army was inconceivable for anyone who had lived in Germany during the war years. The barracks were built in stone, had three floors and had been evacuated a few days earlier. Everything was in perfect order. Each building housed 250 men and after the nights spent on foot on the train, sleeping on the hard cement floor of the attic, seemed to us like sleeping on a feather bed.

## SIGNS THE END WAS COMING

The next day, we were all disappointed to receive nothing: neither bread nor so-called coffee. At noon, no soup. Discipline had gone out of the window, there were no orders to go to work, but no food distributions either. To forget my hunger pangs and to pass the time, I decided to wander around the camp. There were enormous garages full of well aligned tanks, fully equipped repair shops, spare parts for engines, spark-plugs and pistons, and countless, brand new items, all well-organised on shelves and painstakingly classified.

In another building, which was just as well-organised and boasted the same attention to detail, there were thousands and thousands of bottles of medicine for veterinary use, boxes of

bandages, cotton wool and chemical substances, seeing as this was the headquarters of the military veterinary centre for the Hannover district. Two weeks later, nothing of use was left in these buildings. Everything had been broken up and used: the bookcases, benches, even the oak flooring was burned in stoves, which were also used as fireplaces.

Life at Belsen was practically without organisation; everyone wandered around the lawned areas surrounding barracks, watching the coming and going of SS men and women, who pushed carts filled with parcels and disappeared in the direction of the railway station. We observed these individuals, who felt that the time for punishment was upon them. They did not look at the deportees however. They busied themselves with their own tasks, clearly in an anguished state. It seemed as though their only wish was to get away as quickly as possible from the stage of their actions. As for the deportees, they watched them coldly and with curiosity, still keeping a distance, in the continued fear of receiving a beating.

On 12 April, a group of deportees came across a supply of turnip in a kitchen. In less than half an hour, they had completely emptied it. During the rush to seize the turnips, scenes of brutal violence took place. An SS soldier

happened to be walking by, armed with a rifle and, to ensure he lived up to the SS' reputation, fired at the deportees, killing two of them. That day, we ate a slice of turnip, after seven days without food.

As the SS abandoned the camp, they were replaced by Hungarian soldiers, led by the chief physician from Dora hospital, who was a German of Austrian origin, held in favourable esteem by the deportees for his sense of fairness.

During the night, we could hear the uninterrupted thundering of canons. Two large fires illuminated the surrounding plain. At dawn, the volley of canon fire moved northwards. The day was filled with total apathy. Our hunger pangs were incessant, yet our bodies, now accustomed to fasting, were incapacitated and our minds lacked will and initiative. We spent hours lying in the sun in front of the barracks or sleeping. It was clear to all of us that the end of the Third Reich was close, but we had no news from any side.

At the camp, only two SS men remained; they wrapped their left arms with white sashes, while on the building used as a hospital, four white flags were flown.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE BRITISH



On the night of 15 April, a battle took place. The thundering of canons could be heard from north to south. Blazing fires lit up the sky. Reconnaissance aircraft were continuously dropping brightly lit rockets.

In the morning, silence dominated the area once more. Only dense clouds of smoke rose from the horizon, indicating the places where the night-time battle had been fought. It was a day of celebration for those men not imprisoned behind wire fences. The sky was filled with clouds swollen with rain, it was cold and there was still no sign of food. We were now used to this. Perhaps this was part of the defeated Nazis' criminal intentions, or perhaps the deteriorating situation had meant food stocks could not be replenished.

At 3:30 pm a metallic rumble, a purring of engines, a piercing creaking of hardware ripped us from our torpor: it was an uncommon noise which continued for more than half an hour. With great difficulty, I sat up on my mattress, staggered off it and set off shakily towards the main road from where the uproar was coming.

Deportees were making their way from all over the camp to witness the marvellous event: hundreds of tanks, featuring a large white star with five points on the turret, were briskly

rolling northwards on powerful caterpillars. Thousands of gaunt, bony arms waved to the English tank drivers, who stuck their heads out of the turret. Their arrival heralded our liberation, the end of our atrocious suffering. The hope of seeing our loved ones again, our homes and country, was turning into a certainty.

The armoured vehicles continued to roll in for over two hours. After the tanks, came unending lines of lorries, ambulances, truck-drawn cannons and an astonishing amount of motorised war equipment.

Two motorcyclists drew up near the entrance of the camp to ask who we were. The physical differences between the two British soldiers and the deportees was astounding. The British were strong, sun-tanned and appropriately equipped, excited after the victorious days of battle they had just experienced. They looked like free men, even though they were obviously obliged to adhere to a strict discipline. We, on the other hand, were the surviving slaves of the supposed dominators of Europe, who had led us to the edge of the abyss.

While the young men elegantly leapt onto their motorbikes, two tears veiled my vision. One day, I too was strong, healthy and sturdy and now I had been reduced to a staggering

skeleton, weak, faltering and fearful. But that night, an immense joy rang out in my heart. Even my hunger had subsided.

## ATROCIOUS PUNISHMENT

On Monday 16 April 1945, at 9 am, a dozen tanks, lorries and other vehicles entered the camp: the former concentration camp was being taken over by the allied forces. A British major gave us a short speech: "From this moment on, this camp shall be under British administration. Tomorrow you will receive food. We ask you to all remain calm and disciplined".

In all of our hearts, the desire to live was reignited, although we had reached the extreme limits of exhaustion. The Russians and Poles were gripped by an overpowering desire to take revenge and as soon as they felt free, they quickly gave us a chance to get our revenge.

A small group of German kapos had left Dora with us; criminals with an infinite number of crimes on their conscience. With the lack of perception so typical of the Nazis, they had not understood that Hitler's regime had fallen and that their jobs as prison guards had now come to an end; and they had come with us to Belsen. This group included the kapo of the stone

quarry at Ellrich, who bragged about having killed 236 deportees with his bare hands. There were also several kapos and kapo assistants from various departments at Dora, as well as Dora's official executioner, the man who, a few weeks earlier, had placed the noose around the necks of 57 men sentenced to death by hanging.

At around 2 pm on that day, 15 April, the man hunt began. Split into teams, the Russians and Poles hunted down those destined for punishment in under half an hour and beat the 24 criminals to death with sticks, hammers and stones or threw them from windows. They were rendered totally unrecognisable by hammer blows, before being tossed naked into the rubbish. Dora's executioner's heart was ripped out and paraded triumphantly, wedged on a stick.

The hangman of Ellrich, on the other hand, managed to postpone his execution by ten hours. Sensing what was happening, he hid among the British tanks, remaining there from 2 pm to 11 pm, hoping to be saved by the British soldiers. But the latter just stood by and watched because they had not been given any orders on the subject. Like tenacious bulldogs, his pursuers waited for him. And by midnight, Ellrich's hangman had joined his dishonoured colleagues.

## FINALLY

A week had passed since the day of liberation. The rations given to us were of a reasonable quantity. However, after a few days, dysentery struck almost all of the former deportees. Used to a diet without fat and vitamins, ingesting these foods was too much for their weakened organisms. Many had swollen ankles and other ailments affected most of them.

Meanwhile, the French, Belgians and Dutch were preparing to go home as they did not have very far to travel from Belsen. On 26 April, numerous lorries arrived which transported them to Osnabrück. I bid farewell to a stateless Russian man who lived in France, one of the best men I had met in the camps, Gorge Katschakine, and we expressed our hopes of seeing one other again outside. One of his work colleagues, the architect, Gilbert Turk, an extremely intelligent Anglo-French man, who had spent over two years at Dora, left with him. Even several Germans chose to go to France, while two Czechs who hoped to go with them, were stopped by other deportees and turned into the Czech commander as Gestapo spies from Prague.

Finally, the Italians were all grouped together in barracks. We waited hopefully, for a compatriots' commission, or at least a few radio broadcasts, a few comforting words. But nothing came. We continued as ever, to be ignored. The British commander had placed a radio in the square, which enabled us to keep abreast of events as they happened. Hitler was now dead. Himmler had committed suicide a few kilometres outside Belsen; the surrender was under way. Meanwhile, many of us had managed to leave the camp, to go to a nearby village to try to plunder whatever we could carry.

When God so decided, around the end of April, two lorries drew up in front of our barracks. The Lieutenant Colonel Pietro Testa got out and gave us a short speech, promising to unite us with Italian prisoners of war from the Wietzwendorf camp. Colonel Testa's words warmed our hearts and we thanked him more for what he had done for us, than for the food supplies he had brought us, taken from the Italian camp supplies. During that encounter I also met the great Italian, Guareschi, who, as a seasoned journalist, was following Colonel Teste on his mission.

On 5 May, the Colonel's promise was upheld. A convoy of 15 lorries transported the

Italian deportees, who had escaped death in the Nazi camps, from Belsen to Wietzendorf. We left Belsen behind without regret.

At Wietzendorf it was as though we had found a little piece of Italy. I heard Italian spoken everywhere. We received a warm welcome, we were treated courteously by unknown soldiers and all of this attention brought us to tears, after the merciless cruelty we had been subjected to in the camps. We received the same rations as the British soldiers: white bread, meat, butter or margarine, jam, tea, sugar, Vitamin C and dried fruit. These were all things that we hadn't even seen for years and we had almost started to forget them.

## A FEELING OF FREEDOM

The afternoon of 5 May will forever remain engraved in my mind. At around 3 pm, dressed in the deportee's grey and blue uniform, I went to Wietzendorf's Camp 83. It was a gloomy day. Low clouds brushed against the oat and potato fields. A light drizzle permeated to the bone. I walked three kilometres to reach a deserted village. Afflicted by a psychosis after my long detention, I frequently glanced over my shoulder, ready to dodge any blow to the head,

as in Germany, a man dressed as a deportee could not take two steps without being seized by the Gestapo or even by ordinary citizens.

A woman came out of a farmhouse carrying a jug of milk. I walked towards her to ask for some milk. She told me that she was a refugee from Prussia and that she didn't know where to send me. I continued walking along the road until I reached the main square. Orders by the British command were affixed to the walls of the town hall. The protestant church was closed. It was raining. Beneath a portico, I met two Italian Lieutenants. I explained to them where I had come from, why I was dressed as I was, and what my life had been like at Dora. Then, a Montenegrin prisoner of war arrived and gave me a wonderful British soldier's coat and a Yugoslav army hat. I removed my cotton striped jacket and have never before felt such satisfaction as when I put on that woollen coat which protected me from the cold and rain. Finally, I had achieved the certainty of being definitively free to move around Germany without being arrested.

Little by little, the skeleton-like bodies of the former deportees began to feel the beneficial action of healthy and copious food. During the first months, the men consumed extraordinary quantities of supplies, especially seeing as they



were obtaining milk, eggs and bacon from the local farmers. They did so in a rather convincing manner of course: give it to me or I'll set your house on fire. The daily ration was comprised of a litre of hot milk and half a kilo of soaked bread at 6 am; potatoes with tinned meat at 10 am; between two and four litres of potato, carrot and vegetable soup at 1 pm and tea with biscuits at 4 pm. For the evening meal, in groups of four we went about preparing a meal consisting of a few hundred potato gnocchi each, seasoned with margarine and tinned meat.

Almost imperceptibly, the strength returned to our undernourished bodies and with strength came the desire to act and to keep up to date with events in our far away homeland. But our souls were still in mourning for the death of our friends, whose debilitated organisms had been incapable of overcoming a common throat infection or a mild case of pneumonia.

## TO THOSE WHO DIED IN PRISON

At Wietzendorf cemetery, around twenty Italian officials sleep an eternal sleep. They lie at the foot of a monument erected with brilliant simplicity by soldiers and several imprisoned

artists. On 4 June 1945, a religious ceremony was held in memory of those who had fallen and nothing could have given a deeper meaning than the noble words uttered by Colonel Testa, the commander of Italian Camp n° 83. Between gusts of wind and the odd drop of rain, beneath an ashen sky, softened by the green spruce trees, he exclaimed with his masculine, yet emotion-filled voice:

“Fallen of Wietzendorf, we have come here today to cover with flowers this ferocious, enemy land, which you with your sacrifice have devoted to the homeland. All of you, from Captain Mancini, who was assassinated in cold blood by a German sentry, to the Alpine Trooper, Del Buono, who was killed in a final and heinous enemy attack, are martyrs for the same faith; virtuous heroes of the same passion which kept us here as volunteers in the camps.

In your graves, we do not wish only to remember the hatred which crushed you, but rather the love that softened the last vision of your distressed face.

The crown of barbed wire on your crosses brings you closer to Christ, because you too are united and devoted to a religion, that of the homeland, and beneath each cross, the red roses shall represent a burning love and growing from the clods of earth at the base of each cross, the

ivy shoots shall stand for eternal love.

For this love that we share, you the deceased and we the living, will return to our free homes, to the thresholds where mothers, wives and children are waiting.

So that their waiting is not met by disappointment and for our Italy, which must rise again from such devastation, today we make the promise to rebuild, to work and if necessary, to lay down our lives”.

In the next page, the statue that has been realized by dutch artist Daphné Du Barry, known for her worldwide placed life-size sculptures that represent kings and celebrities.

This sculpture has been donated to the Municipality of Trieste and it has been placed in Campo San Giacomo, the district in which Osiride Brovedani used to live.

A twin copy of the sculpture welcomes visitors at Foundation's entrance in Gradisca d'Isonzo.



*His death is not a defeat  
For he lives on  
In the grateful hearts of the many  
Who have been helped  
through his generosity*