

Present Memories, Joseph Matzner

0:01

February 21st 1944 I was shipped with 260 people in cattle cars from Plaszow to Auschwitz 1.

0:12

I had badly injured my leg in Plaszow and I was afraid I would not make it through the selection, but I did.

0:21

The number 174101 was tattooed on my arm and I was assigned to a barrack with my friend Ignac.

0:32

Auschwitz 1 was a show camp for foreign dignitaries and the International Red Cross.

0:39

We were housed in brick buildings which had been a Polish army camp.

0:44

There were constant inspections.

0:47

If anyone was found unclean or unable to work, he would be sent to Auschwitz 2, also known as Birkenau.

0:57

We quickly learned that it was there, only a couple of miles from our camp, that hundreds of thousands of people, mainly Jews, were being murdered in gas chambers.

1:10

We marched to work every day through the main gate under the watchful eyes of the camp commander and the banner Arbeit macht frei, work makes one free.

1:23

To the side was a bandstand with internationally famous Jewish musicians playing marching music.

1:31

If we didn't keep in step, the guards would hit us with a 2 by 4.

1:37

Often we passed large groups of men, women and children being herded to the gas chambers.

1:45

We could do nothing but watch and wonder if we would be next.

1:51

When the wind was blowing toward our camp, we could smell the odor of the bodies burning in the crematoria.

1:59

Life seemed hopeless.

2:02

Some gave up and committed suicide on the electrified barbed wire surrounding our camp.

2:10

Ignac and I were assigned to install and fix roofs on the houses of German officers and guards.

2:19

This gave us the opportunity to find some discarded food.

2:25

In the fall of 1944, stories circulated about the Allied victories, and every so often we would hear the roar of airplanes overhead.

2:38

Some believed that the Allies would save us, but most felt that the Germans would kill us rather than free us.

2:48

On January 16, 1945, as the Russian army was closing in, the Germans decided to liquidate Auschwitz and move us to other camps.

3:01

With all the commotion in the camp, some of us were able to steal bread from the warehouses.

3:09

Ignac and I loaded ourselves with bread and a bottle of rum during the so-called Death March of Auschwitz.

3:18

The German guards made us March during the night and rest during the day in order to protect themselves from the Allied planes.

3:29

Conditions were terrible.

3:31

It was winter with heavy snow on the ground.

3:35

Our uniforms were made from reprocessed paper and our shoes had wooden soles.

3:43

The guards would shoot anyone who fell and didn't get up quickly enough.

3:49

During the first night, Ignac and I opened the bottle of rum and took a couple of slugs.

3:56

The next morning we finished the bottle and had a wonderful rest period.

4:03

We marched again for several nights until we reached the next concentration camp, Gross-Rosen.

4:12

The following day we were loaded onto cattle cars so tight that there was no room to sit down.

4:22

Some stood and sat in their feces and with little air, food and water.

4:29

Many passed out and some died.

4:33

One of the most unusual things happened to me during that trip.

4:38

Even though we felt that we were doomed to die, someone in the cattle car started to play a harmonica.

4:47

Since I also played a harmonica, I yelled over to him to throw it to me so I could play some of my melodies.

4:58

When the harmonica landed on the floor, I mistakenly stepped on it.

5:04

When I picked it up, one of the metal covers was damaged.

5:12

While prying it open to fix it, I noticed something taped to the inside of the metal cover.

5:21

I gently pulled it off and all of a sudden found myself the owner of a \$20 bill.

5:30

I quickly put it in my pocket, played a couple of melodies and returned the harmonica to the owner.

5:40

I then quietly told Ignac what I had found and he almost fainted from the news.

5:48

We had a critical decision to make.

5:51

Should we try to smuggle it through to the next camp and face the consequences if it was found by the Germans?

5:59

Or should we discard it?

6:01

We decided to keep the bill.

6:04

I rolled it tight, tied it with a thread from my uniform and inserted it into my rectum.

6:14

Finally, on February 4th, our transport arrived in Dachau.

6:20

We were ordered to remove all of our clothes and face the selection process.

6:27

I then bent down a couple of times and Ignac checked to make sure that nothing showed. My \$20 bill was not discovered, or I wouldn't be here to tell that story.

6:43

Though we now felt rich, we couldn't even buy a piece of bread with the money because we were afraid to even mention it to anyone.

6:54

While in Dachau we could see through our window the bodies of the dead prisoners and the still living skeletons.

7:05

From Dachau we were transported to a labour camp near Munich.

7:11

In this camp we were able to contact some German guards to exchange dollars for food.

7:19

Finally, at the end of April of 1945, we were again loaded into cattle cars and shipped to southern Bavaria to be liquidated.

7:32

Fortunately, the American army prevented the train to reach its destination and we were liberated at the beginning of May of 1945 in a small town at the railroad siding in southern Bavaria.

7:50

My father was shot during a roundup in my hometown on April 28, 1942 with 40 other prominent Jews before we were all locked up in the ghetto.

8:04

My mother, my sister Tony and most of the women and children with me in the town of ghetto were transported to a Fernetung Slager extermination camp, Treblinka and gas to death in the fall of 1945.

8:23

I would have gone back to Poland to look for any survivors from my family and found none.

8:31

In 1946 I returned to Germany and in August of 1949 came to the United States.

8:40

My wife Alexandra and I have a married daughter with two wonderful grandchildren.