DACHAU

Krakow, Poland -- April, 1944.

The Nazis were rounding up the last of the Polish Jews in the city for deportation, an action officially referred to by the Gestapo as "special handling." But because the nearby concentration camp --Auschwitz -- was grossly beyond capacity, the captive population would be herded like cattle into train cars and be shipped instead to Dachau, three days away, in southern Germany. This was for their own safety, the Nazis explained to the Jews, because the Russian army was on the move westward, and were already said to be outside the eastern Polish city of Lwow.

Jerzy Czartoryski and Leslaw Mickiewicz were neighbors who later became good friends in Krakow. Both were still single, and lived with their families until Hitler invaded the country in 1939 and everyone was separated. Jerzy, age 24, was a man of many talents -- a truck driver, mechanic, furniture maker, and bricklayer. Leslaw was a year older, and made his living as a skilled factory machinist.

The German SS announced that all male Jews were to report to the Krakow rail station the following morning with their identity papers. They would be allowed to bring only one suitcase. They would be going to a work camp, and would be fairly treated, the men of various ages were calmly assured. The SS said that women and children would be processed and safely transported very soon to a separate work camp.

Under gray skies and a drizzle of rain, the men were lined up and each given a yellow, coarse wool 'Star of David' patch to pin to their coats. Documents were next checked and stamped, then the Jews were shuttled onto a waiting steam train, with precisely sixty men jammed into each rail car.

"Not exactly the Orient Express," Jerzy ruefully remarked aloud, after they were finally locked into their assigned train car. A few men laughed at the remark, but most either grunted or responded in somber silence. The crowding was oppressive, but at least the weather -- and hence the inside temperature -- was not too hot. Each car had a small barred window high up in a corner, to provide a scant bit of fresh air. There was dirty straw on the car floor, but no sanitation buckets to act as toilets, or pails of drinking water for the 'passengers.' Fortunately, most men had brought along any food supplies and beverages they had previously scavenged -- along with any money, jewelry, or watches that they still possessed -- and packed everything inside their sole suitcase. Added to that pile was a few necessary changes of clothes, and usually, a handful of treasured family photographs.

Leslaw showed Jerzy the chunk of stale bread, piece of hard cheese, newspaper-wrapped remnant of old sausage, four shriveled apples, three hard-boiled eggs, and a large glass jar of water with a screw-top that he had obtained. Jerzy had a similar mixed amount of scant supplies. "The Germans say this trip could last up to three days, so I hope this will be enough food and drink until we get to wherever they are taking us," Leslaw added.

The trip quickly became miserable. The crowding made sleeping difficult, because one could never stretch out and get comfortable. The stink of unwashed bodies, mixed with the acrid odors of the unavoidable solid and liquid waste mess now collecting in one corner of the train car, was also oppressive. Boredom made the hours crawl by slowly. The men passed the time snoozing or eating, or talking about when they thought the war would end, or sharing stories about their families.

The steady rumors of horrific Nazi gas chambers being built, and the mass extermination of all Jews in Europe, was another serious topic. Some believed it, while others said that the camps were only intended to be work camps for forced labor. "Why would they outright kill us when they need us to do much of the work necessary to continue their war effort?" one man asked. A few others grunted in acknowledgement.

When the topic of last year's Warsaw Ghetto Uprising came up, the crushed mass of sixty Jews in the cramped car became animated and passionate. "It showed that we are not cowards, and that we can fight back, even if it didn't succeed for more than a month," one aged, white-bearded rabbi proclaimed. He lead a solemn Hebrew prayer for those brave souls who had sacrificed their lives in that remarkable rebellion.

Meanwhile, there were rumors that the Americans were poised to invade Europe soon to help England and France fight against the Nazis. This would squeeze Hitler and his troops between two lethal, advancing fronts -- the Allies advancing eastward, with the Russians continually moving westward. The captive Jews excitedly discussed this development too. "If we can simply survive, maybe this awful war will be ending in just a few more months," another man optimistically speculated.

After three days -- having crossed through Czechoslovakia and now being deep into Germany -- they finally passed through Munich. Shortly afterwards, the steam train slowly came to a stop with a squeaking of brakes and a final, long exhaled hiss of steam.

They had arrived at Dachau. The true nightmare was about to begin. The men were grimy, hungry and thirsty, having consumed all of their foodstuffs and liquids.

The twelve boxcars carrying a total of 720 Krakow male Jews were unlocked and flung open. As Jerzy and Leslaw came out of their car, they saw dozens of stone-faced, armed SS soldiers, some holding back snarling and barking, vicious-looking German Shepherd dogs.

"Quickly... line up for processing! No talking! *Schnell...schnell!* (Hurry!)" the camp guards yelled. "Put your suitcases down. They will be returned to you later in your assigned barracks. *Schnell!* No talking!" The commands were all given in German, but fortunately, most Poles were bi-lingual in both Polish and German.

The captives were herded into a single long line. A stern officer at the front the line stood with his leather-gloved right hand extended. Like all SS personnel, he wore an all-black uniform with various patches and medals. His cap displayed the dreaded 'Death's Head' insignia -- a white skull above two crossed bones. With a slight flip of his wrist, he indicated with his thumb that each man was to go either to the right or left. Leslaw noticed, as he approached his judgement, that the younger, more healthy, and more fit men went to the right, whereas the old, the crippled, or the sickly went to the left. He and Jerzy were sent to the right. The white-bearded rabbi from their car was sent to the left.

Dachau was the oldest concentration camp, and was originally built in 1933 to house political prisoners. Over time, however, it had greatly expanded. Currently, it could hold 3600 prisoners in twenty-four barracks, each housing 150 men. The inmates consisted of Catholic Poles, Polish Jews, assorted political prisoners and criminals, priests, Communists, captured Russian soldiers, Czechs, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and Gypsies (called Romi). Since September of last year, the Camp Commandant, or *Hauptsturmfuhrer,* was Eduard Weilter.

The camp was encircled by a four-mile long fence of electrified barbed-wire. A three-meter wide 'No Man's Land' preceded the fencing. Past the fencing was a water-filled trench, also three meters wide but three meters deep. There were seven evenly-spaced watchtowers on the fenced perimeter, manned by armed guards with heavy machine guns.

Outside the western side of the camp -- just beyond the secured compound -- were the SS barracks, the vast work factories, and the River Wurm. Finally, a crematoria block featuring four disposing ovens lay right outside the same western electrified wire and gate. A gas chamber was adjacent to that facility.

Leslaw and Jerzy stayed together as they were shunted into Barracks #16. They were met by a dour, armed SS soldier named Jurgen, and a *kapo* (a prison functionary, a kind of assistant supervisor) named Olek. Looking to be in his mid-40s but pale and less than robust, Olek carried a wicked-looking 35 cm. wooden baton that resembled a club. He also wore a special dark blue cap to distinguish himself from the other prisoners. He rapped the baton now and then on the side of a straw-filled, triple-stacked wooden rack -- which served as bunk beds for the prisoners -- as he talked.

"Here are your instructions, so listen carefully. You must remove all of your clothing, including your shoes, and place them here." He indicated a worn center table with his baton. "Unpin your yellow star patch and place it aside. You will pin it back on your new prison tunic in a few moments. Next, remove any rings or eyeglasses and place them in this red bucket." He indicated where. "Then put on your camp outfits, and find a pair of wooden shoes." Olek showed the Jews where these items were stacked and piled in a far corner. Jurgen, meanwhile, remained silent, obviously bored with these routine instructions.

The clothing consisted of light-weight, crudely woven cotton pants and tunic, gray with black stripes. There was a matching soft cap made with the same fabric.

"What about our luggage? When will it be returned to us?" one man innocently asked. "When can we eat and drink again, and where can we wash ourselves? After all, we have suffered a rather long journey."

Suddenly, Jurgen exploded in rage. "Silence, you filthy *Juden*! He grabbed Olek's baton and struck the inquirer viciously in the head. The poor soul crumpled to the barracks floor."You never ask questions here, you scum! You only answer 'yes' or 'no' and obey orders! Whenever you see a German soldier or officer from now on, you are to stand still and remove your cap and look down at the ground. If you don't do exactly as you are asked, you will be beaten! Is that clear? *Verstehen?*" Finished, he tossed the brutal wooden baton back to Olek, his face still flushed with fury. He left the room in disgust.

All the Poles were shocked at this merciless display. Jerzy looked at Leslaw, and they both knew that this was going to be the new, cruel reality of Dachau. The men silently stripped and did as they were told, redressing in the crude, required prison garb. There were no socks to go with the rough wooden shoes. They fit poorly, and would soon cause blisters and bleeding and infections. The beaten man slowly regained his senses and likewise followed the instructions, his head visibly swollen where he had been struck, his head still painfully throbbing.

The *kapo* cleared his throat about ten minutes later and continued giving the new prisoners their instructions. With Jurgen gone, Olek's tone softened somewhat. After looking around for any wandering SS personnel, he lowered his voice, and now spoke confidentially in Polish.

"I am a prisoner just like you. I am Czech, and a Catholic. I was arrested as an 'undesirable' by the Nazis. I took this job merely to stay alive. I was favored because I could speak German, Polish and Czech well. I am given extra rations and even clean clothes occasionally -- providing I always do as I am told. I must be publically stern with you, but only when we are around the Germans. It is only act of sorts -- an act of survival, if you will. Believe it or not, I was once a highly-skilled electrician in Prague. Yet here I am, stuck now, these past eleven months. As for my wife and son, I have not seen them since they were taken away in '42." Olek paused for a moment and walked over to the beaten man and gently apologized that he had been abused by the sadistic Jurgen. Then he continued.

"We rise here at 4:30, and we assemble on the parade ground for a head count by barracks at 5:00. This can go on for an hour or more. You must stand perfectly still the entire time, whether in rain or snow, or you will be severely beaten. If you are still alive by winter, it gets very cold outdoors. You will never get any warmer clothes than what you are now wearing. Breakfast is served at 7:00. Your meals here are always the same: a half-liter of false 'coffee' made from burned hazelnut husks, nothing more. Next, you are marched to your assigned work detail at 7:30. Tell me your skills after I am done talking and I will try to match you for your work assignment in the munitions factory or elsewhere. At 1:00 you will have lunch -- a liter of watery potato and turnip soup with a little rye flour mixed in. Then it is back to work until 6:00. Another hour or two in assembly on the parade ground, after which you get a dinner of 300 grams (10 ounces) of dark bread and either a 25 gram (1 ounce) piece of meat or a slice of margarine. The bread is supposed to be partly saved for breakfast the following day, but most inmates are so starved that they devour it all immediately. After that, it is 'lights out' at 9:00. Every day is exactly the same," Olek revealed.

"But not is not enough food to live on!" Leslaw proclaimed, in a lowered voice, carefully in Polish, after looking around for any roaming SS.

"You are right, my young friend. A normal man needs 2500 calories from food each day to remain healthy, but here, it is barely 1800 calories by my estimation. And I heard some of the guards whispering that it may well drop down to only 700 calories per day due to troop food shortages and transport problems caused by the Russian advance. Yet that is the sinister idea adopted by the so-called Nazi 'Master Race.' We are here to die from overwork -- doing hard physical labor, like those doomed on the 'left line' separation, when you first arrived -- or from malnutrition, 'medical experiments,' torture, starvation, disease, or even suicide when one can't stand it any longer. People throw themselves onto the electrified fence, or are machine-gunned to death while purposely wandering in the 'No Man's Land' section. Poor sanitation and other illness factors have dysentery, pneumonia, and tuberculosis running rampant here at Dachau. Even typhus has broken out here, I've been told. I myself have contracted TB, and cough up spots of blood at night, but I must keep it a secret from the Germans or they will immediately replace me to die. The job of all of us is simply to stay alive, any way possible. As long as you can work, there is a chance to survive. The war appears to be going badly for Germany, and I think that the end for them is growing near."

Jerzy spoke up. "We are never getting our suitcases back, are we? And there is no extra food for us, or showers to wash? And any rings and eyeglasses are gone forever?"

"You are correct, young man. All of your money and valuables and other belongings are now the official property of the Third Reich. Each barracks has only one water spigot for 150 men to use. Your prisoner outfits will never be washed, and I'm afraid you will wear them until they become nothing but soiled rags. Now, claim your bunk where you will sleep tonight, three to a bed, and grab a single thin blanket and guard it with your life. You see, even in April, the nights get cold here in Bavaria," the Czech *kapo* advised.

The new arrivees were then marched out to a different nearby camp building to have their heads shaved, supposedly to discourage fleas and lice. Afterwards, using a pencil and a clipboard, Olek took down each man's name and noted what work skills he possessed. In the morning, the dreaded SS official Jurgen would return, and announce where each man was assigned for work detail after the usual parade assembly.

Still ravenous after their paltry evening meal --after the other sullen returning inmates came back to Barracks #16 from their work details -- Leslaw and Jerzy talked in desperation while lying in their bunk. The third man, Moshe, sharing their straw bed, had already fallen asleep in exhaustion.

"We have to figure a way out of this hellhole while we still have our health and enough energy," Jerzy admitted. "I figure the average man would simply die here after just a year under these dire conditions."

Leslaw agreed. "There has to be way to escape, so keep your eyes and ears open, and think of some possible exit plans and options." The two friends turned and fell asleep.

At 4:30, in the dark, pre-dawn chill, the harsh overhead lighting in the barracks was thrown on, and Jurgen and his armed SS thugs began shouting and screaming, telling the Jews and others to get up (*Schnell!)* and get ready for outdoor parade ground roll call. Men pushed and shoved to get a handful of water to drink from the only spigot, while others rushed outside to use the lone latrine -- the latter obviously being filthy and disgusting. Once outside, Olek helped his assigned inmates to line up in precise rows. Then they slowly waited...and waited...for the tally 'head count' and end report. Stomachs growled with hunger and legs soon ached to move. But the forlorn assembly was forced to remain stock-still or suffer a brutal beating.

Leslaw and Jerzy noted that although all the prisoners were dressed identically, different colored identification patches were visible: Jews still had their yellow stars, but other patches were brown, green, black, red, violet, or even pink. The men learned later that black was for the Romi gypsies, violet was for the Jehovah's Witnesses, pink was for homosexuals, brown was for political prisoners, and so on. Then Jerzy noticed that a few sorry-looking souls were wearing a white armband with the German word *Blod* written on it. This meant 'stupid,' for anyone who was characterized as retarded or otherwise mentally defective.

The prisoners remained at attention for an agonizing ninety-five minutes, then were dismissed for their usual paltry breakfast of tepid ersatz coffee.

Jurgen examined Olek's notes and assigned Leslaw to the munitions factory, seeing as he was a skilled machinist. Jerzy was sent to the SS motor pool, to repair and service their cars and trucks, given his former skills.

The monotonous days crawled by, then the weeks. Every inmate was growing weaker through overwork, beatings, and lack of proper nutrition. In the evening after the pathetic dinner, Jerzy asked Olek in a lowered voice in Polish why the prisoners didn't mount a massive escape rush, seeing as the 3600 inmates outnumbered their captors by a ratio of twenty-to-one. The captives were there to be worked or starved to death anyway, so why not risk their lives now, with a least a chance of escape? Many would obviously die in the attempt from the murderous armed guards, but some captives could theoretically make it to freedom.

"This question always comes up, sooner or later, from the new arrivees," Olek explained. "The answer is simple: in every man's mind is hope...hope for one more day of life. Maybe the war will suddenly end. Maybe the camp will be liberated by the Allies. No one know what day or what hour such things might happen. So it is best to be docile and compliant with the Nazis, and try to just stay alive, day-by-day. Of course, such relief has not come yet, but hope for it keeps a man going. Naturally, as one's strength wanes and nothing appears likely to change in the long term, suicide -- or apathetic withdrawal until one simply dies -- looks quite logical."

Leslaw asked Olek next if he ever considered trying to escape from Dachau.

"Oh, yes. Many times. I even worked out a plan which I believe could work. It's risky and dangerous, but better to try than to stay here for an almost certain death unless the camp is freed. But I am too weak now with my TB. I will probably die here in a few months. My condition is getting worse by the week. With no doctor or medicines or being able to go to a sanitarium, I am lost. I wouldn't last a day on the run. But I can tell by your question that you are interested, yes? For you and your friend?"

Leslaw and Jerzy looked at each other, then nodded back to Olek.

"Very well. We will talk again in private tomorrow night before lights out. I will give you the rough outline of my plan then. The specifics must wait until August, however, when the heavy rains usually come. You will learn why you can't attempt an escape until then," Olek advised.

The next day, Jerzy took a chance by quietly asking another Polish inmate, Casimir -- who was from Poznan -- what he knew about the camp crematoria (which was referred to by the guards as 'Barracks X'), seeing as the motor pool where they worked together was right past that area when they were marched to work.

Waiting until the SS guards were distracted away from them by another matter, Casimir told Jerzy what he had heard, speaking in a low whisper.

"Everyone who dies here gets cremated and his ashes are then dumped into a large pit in the forest. The Nazis want no evidence or graves to link them with our extermination. There are four ovens in the crematoria. There is also a gas chamber, but it is not like the fake showers used at Auschwitz -- which rumors tell of the killing of thousands of men, women, and children, mostly Jews, every day. I don't know if the gas chamber here has ever been used. I have heard, however, that groups of our own 'undesirables' have been trucked out of here in the middle of the night and gassed to death in Austria -- at Hartheim, near Linz, I believe. But make no mistake, Jerzy. We are specifically here to be starved and worked to death. Our destiny in Dachau is ultimately the oven, my friend. And remember the sign on the main gate when you first arrived here by train? It said: *Arbeit Macht Frei.* 'Work will make you free.' That phrase is a farce. It is nothing but a sick, sadistic, Gestapo lie."

When Leslaw joined his friend back at the barracks for so-called 'dinner.' Jerzy shared what he learned. Leslaw, in turn, told what he had secretly learned that day while working in the munitions factory. His job was to randomly check with calipers the accurate dimensions of German anti-aircraft shell casings. All workers here were strictly warned not to attempt any acts of sabotage, or they would be immediately be given a bullet in the back of their head.

"Remember when we arrived in Dachau and they were separating the men into either right or left lines? I found out that those on the 'left' were destined for the fastest deaths. They were put on reduced rations in special barracks, then given the hardest jobs requiring brutal physical labor, such as breaking rocks into road gravel using pickaxes and sledgehammers, or chopping down trees and hauling heavy logs with ropes and chains. Because these poor souls were already old or sick or crippled, they died after just a few days. Their bodies were cremated and their ashes dumped. I learned that about forty-five men die in Dachau every day. Yet every Friday, a fresh trainload of 720 victims arrives to replace them. It is an assembly line of Nazi death -- a systematic, horrific extermination of innocent civilians!"

Olek later confirmed both men's discoveries that day when the trio went in a private corner of Barracks #16 to continue their prior conversation regarding escape.

"Here is the general plan. You must be willing to walk a total of 225 kilometers (140 miles), averaging about 25 km. (15-16 miles) per day for nine days. You will be escaping by going west, then southwest, then west again to the Swiss border at St. Margrethen, across the Rhine River, for your freedom. You will journey through rolling valleys and flat forest lands, but not over any Alpine mountains. I know this area well from my youth, because my family used to take us camping there years ago. You must only travel at night, and avoid any roads or large towns and, of course, any German people. There are many small farms on your route, so you can probably steal food from crop fields, or barns, or eggs from chicken coops, as you journey. Once you arrive near Fussen, you will carefully bypass the city, then veer west again. You will head towards Immenstadt, then continue on towards Lake Constance to Bregenz, which is part of Austria but still under German-control. After another day of walking, you can swim across the Rhine just upstream of a heavily-guarded border bridge. The river narrows, and is only fifty meters (150 feet) across there. Once you reach the Swiss bank and St. Margrethen, you will be safe, and will certainly be given political asylum by the International Red Cross."

"But how do we initially get out of camp, Olek, with the armed SS guards, the killer dogs, the electric fencing, and the water barricades?" Leslaw wanted to know. Jerzy nodded.

"That I will tell you in precise detail once the rains come in August, so don't worry. And there is one more thing you must consider: you will each probably need to kill a guard as you make your escape. Are you both prepared to do that?"

Although neither man had ever killed another human being in the past, Leslaw and Jerzy briefly gazed at each other, then looked back at Olek.

"We will do whatever needs to be done," Jerzy spoke for them both, with grim sincerity and determination. To stay here in Dachau was to die within a year, everyone realized. The two friends from Krakow had no choice but to comply.

The month of May came and went. The weather continued to warm up. But by mid-June, word carried by some recently arriving prisoners began circulating among the inmates that the Americans had successfully landed in Normandy, and that the Germans were being pushed out of France and back eastward.

Soon after that good news, however, the camp Commandant, *Hauptsturmfuhrer* Eduard Weilter, made a rare appearance at morning assembly, dressed in his finest regalia.

"It has come to my attention that there are accounts circulating within the camp that the Americans have landed in Europe, and that they have forced a retreat of our glorious German forces. Nothing could be further from the truth! Yes, the Americans have arrived...but they are soft and lazy men, and cowardly, and they are certainly no match for our vastly superior and fearless Aryan soldiers. We will totally crush them and send them back with their tails between their legs like the mongrel dogs that they are! That is all. Heil Hitler! (He and all SS clicked their boot heels in unison and saluted.) Officers, you may dismiss after your required roll call and head count."

It wasn't long afterward that the already scant food rations for the prisoners were reduced. The rationale given was blamed on the relentless Russian advance towards the Fatherland, which had now swept through virtually all of Poland. The thousands of Dachau inmates grew weaker and weaker. Without the proper nutrition providing the essential vitamins and minerals, their bodies were actually consuming themselves. Those over the age thirty were already resembling skeletal, walking cadavers. Everyone dreamed about food, and talked about food. Sex with women was entirely forgotten, because the sole male desire was only for food. Meanwhile, most inmates had developed a chronic cough from this or that disease. Skin lesions refused to heal. Any cut or wound rapidly became infected. Many had bleeding gums and lost teeth. Jaundice hit hard those poor souls nearing death. All of the men's unclipped fingernails and toenails grew into ugly claws. Some searched for rough stones on the ground to use in an attempt to file them down. The men's heads and beards, however, were still crudely shaved once a month, while random beatings by Jurgen and his SS henchmen continued. Leslaw and Jerzy frankly worried if Olek would live until the rains of August. Sickening smoke from the huge lone chimney at Barracks X testified that the four ovens of the crematoria were working overtime to accommodate the increasing numbers of deaths.

In late July, rumors again swept the camp that an assassination attempt with a bomb had been made on the Fuhrer's life at his Wolf's Lair compound in East Prussia. He had been markedly wounded in the explosion but not killed. And the plot had been hatched by his own Generals! "Good...I hope someone kills that evil bastard soon, so this war can end and we can get out of this hell," Jerzy whispered to a Romi coworker, as they were performing repairs on an SS truck.

When August finally came, the three conspirators watched the skies for the necessary heavy rain storms that Olek was expecting. Day after day brought nothing. But then the winds shifted, and dark clouds gathered. Olek sought out Leslaw and Jerzy after dinner, and told them the escape plan specifics.

"If it pours rain starting tomorrow and into tomorrow night, that is when we must make our move. Part of my duties this month is to collect the daily prison dead in a wheeled handcart and take the bodies over to be destroyed in the crematoria ovens. Usually, this gruesome task takes three or four trips. The same boyish and rather inexperienced young SS guard named Gunther lets me out of the compound by the only gate there, but he never closes it completely or locks it behind me. Usually, I finish my delivery indoors, then leave. But in the rainy downpour and messy confusion, I will explain to Gunther that I can only unload the bodies near the doorway of Barracks X, and pile them up there, and that I will return the following dawn and drag the corpses inside to be burned like always. He is so young that he won't care, so he will agree."

"What happens next? Jerzy asked.

"I will begin piling up the naked bodies, but I'll suddenly act concerned, and tell Gunther that I noticed a strange flickering of the nearby camp floodlights in the storm winds and rain. He knows that I am a trusted *kapo* as well as being a trained electrician, so he will believe me. I will step away and go quickly to the circuit panel behind the gas chamber. There, I will short-circuit the area floodlights using a stolen screwdriver hidden in my pocket. The area which I and Gunther are at will be plunged into darkness for several minutes. That is when you must both act."

"What do we do? Leslaw asked.

"You strip totally naked, then carefully hide underneath the camp buildings while going from barracks to barracks until you can slip out of the compound in the darkness together through the slightly open gate. The guard tower will not be able to see you, so don't worry about that, and there are no dogs to bark in this area because it is too close to the SS barracks and they don't want the noise. Meanwhile, I will call out for Gunther to come and assist me. That is your signal to run and then lie naked on top of the dead body pile. Lay absolutely still! I will restore the floodlights with Gunther's help, telling him I fixed a loose wire, then he and I will exit and lock the gate as we return to the prison compound. Wait an hour or two while lying on the corpse pile, then quietly get up and head towards the west, going carefully past the SS barracks complex. In the pouring rain, no one will be outside. Lastly, you must each kill an SS guard and steal his clothes and boots as you dress again and get away. Gunther once told me in a joking manner that there is a final and remote gate area where two sentries are known to doze off on guard duty. ("I wish I could have their job. They having nothing important to do all night, because nobody ever goes there and checks up on them!" he admitted.) So those are your targeted victims."

"Won't you be accused of aiding an escape, Olek, when they discover that Leslaw and I are missing?" Jerzy asked. "Surely, Gunther will also be questioned and be forced to testify to his part in the suspicions?"

"Assuredly, yes. The following sunrise, during assembly, I will be caught. Gunther will be severely punished too. I will probably be tortured, then most certainly be put to death later that same day. I will tell them nothing, of course. And because I am already dying of tuberculosis, I feel it is a good tradeoff to exchange my waning life in helping two fine young men like you for getting a chance to live," Olek admitted.

The three men briefly clasped hands in warm communion, their eyes watering with emotion.

Olek's brilliant plan was later executed by the two friends from Krakow -- during a blessed downfall of non-stop, driving rain -- without any problems. Killing the two sentries with stealth, and swapping out their clothes, was quite a grim yet necessary challenge, however. The Nazi guards had been asleep, as expected, when they were grabbed from behind and strangled using the stocks of their own rifles across their throats. But the job was done at last, and quickly put out of the Polish Jews' minds, because other, more critical matters were vastly more important now.

And so, the hardest part had begun: the long and risky task, while traveling 225 kilometers overland on foot -- hopefully to freedom in Switzerland -- without being killed or captured. The pair needed to find plenty of food and water to make such an arduous trek, seeing as they already were half-starved and weakened from four months in the Dachau death camp. To add to their misery, their wool uniform clothes were soaked and cold, and their stolen boots were ill-fitting. It was probably an hour past midnight.

The rain had finally stopped and the skies were partly clear as the pair headed due west after leaving the huge Dachau complex area. A dim quarter-moon provided some light for the pair to see where they were going, but luckily, it was mostly dark for anyone trying to pursue the escapees. They ran as fast as their weakened conditions allowed.

When the sun eventually came up, they noted its position, so as to ascertain like a compass which direction was south, and later southwest. Exhausted, they found a remote spot, hidden well in the forest, to sleep.

They awoke in mid-afternoon, and needed to wait until dark again to travel. They were tremendously hungry and thirsty, which gave them both splitting headaches and mental lethargy. But they forced themselves to stay focused.

"Tonight, we have to find food and water, or we won't make it," Leslaw grimly proclaimed. Jerzy groaned his agreement.

Luckily, the pair happened upon an open field area that night, where a corn crop was growing. Listening carefully for any signs that they were being heard or followed, or for any barking dogs alerting their owners of intruders, the two starving Polish Jews each quickly and quietly picked a half-dozen mostly-ripe yellow ears, then made their getaway. They would greedily eat these as they marched on through the rest of the night. A stream that they later stumbled upon also gave them much-needed relief from their burning thirst.

Two nights later, they had made regular progress. Along the way, they stole some potatoes, carrots, and apples from sacks and barrels in a barn near a remote farmhouse, stuffing as much food as they could carry inside their uniform shirts. Their strength was thankfully recovering, aided by the deep sleep they gladly took during most of the daytime. Still, Jerzy and Leslaw could never really relax or be at peace until they crossed the Swiss border. They would react in fear at any strange noise or disturbance. Occasionally, while resting during daylight hours, they would spot German farmers or other civilians in the distance, moving about or working. But because the pair steered far clear of any roads, they never saw any vehicles.

The escaped Jews continued for two more nights, estimating that they were traveling the twenty-five or so kilometers each night. They once came across fields growing tomatoes and potatoes, and carefully helped themselves. They later stumbled upon an orchard too, growing peaches and apricots. The sweet fruits made their mouths exploded with pleasure and delight! Yet if they approached a barn in the darkness of night and heard a barking dog, they immediately skipped visiting there and bypassed that property. Of course, they fantasized -- when chatting while they waited for sunset to resume traveling -- about enjoying a plateful of thick, rich sausages or a juicy pork loin or a hearty beefsteak, but such pleasures would be impossible until they passed into Switzerland. There would be gallons of Pilzner beer too, they swore, to toast with and wash down their feasts, once they were free again!

On day five, Jerzy and Leslaw viewed the Forggensee lake. They were getting closer to Fussen, and were perhaps only four days from the Swiss border. It was here that Olek had warned them to be especially cautious. They thought about their faithful Czech friend, and missed him dearly, and realized with much sadness that he was probably already dead at the cruel hands of the merciless SS.

Remembering to steer far from the city to avoid being noticed or captured, the men saw the famous castle of Bavarian King Ludwig II, Neuschwanstein, on a high ridge in the distance to the east of Fussen.

Once far past the city, they made their way due west again, towards Immenstadt. They would continue to go overland for four more days, always at night, past the Austrian town of Bregenz, then towards the Swiss border and hopefully, their ultimate freedom. But their feet were in dreadful shape -- battered and bruised in the stolen Nazi boots that didn't fit right. Each was plagued with various foot sores and blisters.

By nightfall on the ninth and final day since their escape from Dachau, Jerzy and Leslaw were near immense Lake Constance, and saw what Olek had warned them about: the border-crossing bridge over the Rhine was crawling with Nazi guards and was arrayed with a systematic series of gates and checkpoints. The two Poles finished the scant remains of their pilfered food stores and drank deeply from a convenient nearby stream, and planned their last escape phase. It was actually possible to vaguely see the red-with-white-cross Swiss flag flying, just a precious mile or so away, in St. Margrethen.

"Let's go," Jerzy said. "It's now or never."

The men made their way ever closer through a forest that sat on the east side of the Rhine. The brave pair moved slowly, and were attentive to every sound. The moon was at half-phase, unfortunately shedding more light now than the relative dimness they enjoyed on their first night sneaking out of the concentration camp. At last, they appeared to be about a half-mile away from the Swiss side. The Poles saw the uniforms of Swiss soldiers attentively behind barbed wire gates and fencing.

Suddenly, a voice cried out in German: "*Halt! Stap!Bleib wo du bist!"* (Stop! Stay where you are!)

Leslaw yelled to Jerzy in Polish, "Run!"

The two escaped Jews sped off in the darkness, dodging trees and forest floor debris. But a rifle shot soon echoed. Jerzy was hit and he went down hard, with a groan.

"Keep going...save yourself, Leslaw! Leave me! You can still make it!" he cried out.

Leslaw stopped and spun to look down at his friend lying on his stomach. The bullet had hit Jerzy in the back. It was a bad wound, and it began bleeding profusely.

"*Halt wieder oder ich schiesse!"* (Halt again, or I shoot!) they heard the same voice yell from further away.

"I won't leave you to die here on German soil. You're coming with me to freedom!" Leslaw cried as he hoisted Jerzy up on his shoulder and continued to drag his friend as fast as he could to the narrowed river crossing. Meanwhile, German klaxon alarms were going off in the distance. Spotlights soon began sweeping the area over and near Leslaw's and Jerzy's position.

The forest gave way next to a flat stretch of land leading to the banks of the Rhine River. Quickly, Leslaw removed Jerzy's boots, then his own, then gently carried his moaning friend into the chilly waters. He furiously began to swim a side-stroke, cradling Jerzy's head in the crook of his other arm in a life-saver's position, so as to keep his friend's head safely above the water while they moved in tandem. The modest current was moving them downstream, dangerously towards the large border bridge. The artificial lights near the border crossing made the river a dark brownish color. Several bullets from German rifles ripped through the waters near the heads of the courageous escapees, but all narrowly missed. The alert Swiss border guards, with their own rifles at the ready, were waiting for whatever dramatic trouble was coming their way as they watched the urgent, suspenseful scene.

When the two exhausted Poles reached the opposite river bank, Leslaw cried out in German (assuming the Swiss wouldn't understand spoken Polish), with ragged gasps, his strength waning: "*Nicht schiessen! Polnische Juden flohen aus Dachau! Bitte gib uns asyl!"* (Don't shoot! Polish Jews escaped from Dachau! Please give us asylum!)

The startled Swiss patrol rushed to pull the men up and past their barbed-wire border barricade.

"Welcome, my friends...you are safe now," a cordial Swiss officer said as he quickly ran over to greet them. "Thank God you made it!" he beamed.

But when Jerzy was immediately examined, he was sadly found to have already breathed his last. His face in death, however, was at peace.

Leslaw broke down and wept when he learned the heart-breaking news. He hugged the lifeless body of his friend and neighbor from Krakow, remembering all that they had been through together. Finally, he murmured: "At least Jerzy died a free man...on free soil..."

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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Postscript:

Dachau was liberated by American forces on April 29, 1945. Over 32,000 deaths were officially documented there, but certainly thousands more were never reported by the Nazis.

Over six million European Jews and five million other prisoners of war were murdered while captive in the dozens of German concentration camps constructed during World War II.

Participating in Dachau's liberation was the U.S. Army's 42nd Rainbow Division, which included my own father, Staff Sergeant Leo P. Karolewski.