

From the Testimony of Haim Kuznitsky about Surviving a Death March Until Liberated by the British Army

...The aerial bombings became more and more frequent. We heard the German guards saying amongst themselves that “Ivan is close” (meaning the Russians). Without any prior warning the *Blockschreiber* [block registrar] summoned us and said that he had always made sure we received our food rations, that he himself had never struck anyone (a lie!), and that we should remember him favorably when the Russians would take over the camp. Now he was a *katzetnik* [epithet for a camp inmate, deriving from the German word for concentration camp, *Konzentrationslager*] just like us, and our welfare had always been his primary concern. Nonsense!

I think this was the first time we had felt clearly that they were afraid. Of course, no one tried to argue with him, we all nodded agreement.

Suddenly an order came to evacuate the camp. We received provisions for the road: half a loaf of bread and a bit of margarine. They lined us up and we started to leave the camp, block after block, escorted by the SS.

The march lasted many long hours and whoever could not keep up was shot on the spot. It was forbidden even to move those who had been shot to the side of the road, so we had to step on the corpses, which made walking even more difficult.

Everyone was swaying from exhaustion, but not until early evening were we permitted to rest, in a grove. Some collapsed onto the ground like the dead, others scrounged for something to eat. I noticed a worm by the tree beneath which I was lying. I grabbed it and swallowed it alive. The others turned out to be as “clever” as I was, and they also ate snails, worms, and various insects. During the one day we had covered much ground, a great many kilometers. Our way was strewn with bodies of those who had been shot and those who had been left to die of exhaustion. For the most part we went through villages, fields, and forests, and not via main roads. At night they let us rest for a few hours. Some slept in the open fields, others in cow sheds. Beside hunger and thirst, we were plagued by lice and fleas that swarmed over us in droves, ate

our flesh, penetrated our ears and behind the ears. These accursed pests did not let up even in the few hours allotted us for sleep and rest.

In this way we walked a few days with hardly any rest. We covered great distances. We marched by day and night. We made only brief stops to relieve ourselves and for a short rest. Some of us relieved ourselves as we walked because it was forbidden to stop while the march was in progress – anyone who slowed down was shot in the head. Our only food was forest insects and leaves. It was impossible to know if they were poisonous or not. But all we wanted was to get something into our stomach, no matter what. More and more people came down with diarrhoea and relieved themselves while walking, and the stench of the faeces that we left behind us must have annihilated all the insects in the area.

More and more people collapsed of exhaustion and were shot. After a few days we came to a river (probably the Vistula). It was the first river I had ever seen. We reached the river bank, where a huge boat was waiting to take us to the other side. In this way we reached Hel.

At Hel there were enormous ferries for transporting coal. There were three ferries like that. I was shoved onto one of them. Everybody received half a loaf of bread (maybe a whole loaf, I can't remember exactly) and half a package of margarine.

The ferries were divided into cells of 5X5 meters and we crowded into one of them. We sat on the floor, legs spread so someone could sit between, and in this way they crammed in as many people as possible. The crowding was so great that it was impossible to move, and if someone leaned back the whole row would fall backward. To get up or change position was out of the question. I envied sardines that lie lengthwise in a tin and are drenched in oil. We, in contrast, were packed in while sitting up and drenched in faeces. However, this situation did not continue for long.

Our ferry was towed by a steamship. On its deck were "our" SS men who had escorted us during the march from Stutthof to the ferries. The food we had received for the way we had eaten already on the first day and we were given no more to eat or drink. On the first night some people died. With a great effort we managed to get them up onto the deck and throw them into the sea. After two days of this we were more "comfortable" because of the large number of people who died, and we could even change position. People continued to die and to be thrown into the sea. The hunger and thirst became more and more unbearable. We started to drink sea water. The more sea water I drank, the

thirstier I became. I drank and immediately emptied the water by urinating. The more I drank, the more I urinated. From the deck I saw the bodies of those who had been thrown into the sea. They did not sink but floated in our wake, like a school of fish.

We had been at sea for a few days. It was said that the ferry changed course frequently, because every time it tried to reach shore it turned out that the area had already been captured by the Americans. The whole Baltic coast was said to be in American hands, and they [the Germans] did not know where to take us and kept looking for a bit of coast that was not under American control. The situation was becoming increasingly difficult and desperate.

I functioned like a machine. I stopped thinking why, in fact, I was torturing myself by continuing to drink sea water that burned my insides and aggravated my thirst. The food was long since finished; I couldn't remember when I had last eaten. The only question was when my turn would come and I too would be thrown into the sea. Everyone was utterly exhausted. Only once in while someone would go on deck to draw a little sea water, drink it, and urinate. I could no longer smell the stench of the feces and the rot. We even stopped removing the bodies. We lay like that, between the dead and the living. You could hardly tell which was which. If I laid my head on someone and he didn't move, that meant he was dead and I could rest a few hours without interference, using the body as a pillow. By now there was so much room below decks that I could stretch out and prop up my head.

When I went to sleep I was certain that this was the end, that I would never get up again. In my mind's eye I saw myself thrown into the sea, and perhaps someone would stand on the deck and watch indifferently as my body floated on the water. As though the sea refused to ingest me.

A thousand thoughts raced through my mind. I saw mother just as I had seen her that last time, from the hospital window on the top floor. I saw father just as I had seen him at Auschwitz. Ezra I saw wearing blue clothes with the yellow patch on his chest (I have no idea why his clothes were blue). I saw Avivaleh, Haim and Eliezer. Who is now reading the diary they took from me at Auschwitz, I wondered. While we were still at Auschwitz Michael had said

that by comparison with Auschwitz the ghetto was paradise. And if Auschwitz was hell, what was our sea journey? I was so debilitated that Junger's hallucinations barely penetrated my consciousness. I heard a girl crying, she was speaking to me, she was pulling my head, but more than that I can't remember. I know that I fell asleep.

That was our tenth day at sea. A tremendous jolt accompanied by an explosion awoke me before dawn. The power of the explosion had made the ferry leap up and fall back. So strong was the jolt that everyone, the living and the dead, was thrown into one pile. With a great effort I succeeded in extricating myself from the heap of bodies and dragging myself onto the deck. People on the deck said that the Germans had fired a torpedo at the ferry and then fled, leaving us on the high seas. They also said that people who had spent the night on the deck heard on the radio that Hitler had been killed, Germany had surrendered, and the war was over. This was on the morning of 3 May 1945. And really, the ferry was standing motionless in the middle of nowhere and the German steamship that had been towing us had vanished into thin air. Among the prisoners there happened to be some Norwegians and one of them had been a sea captain. (The Norwegians and the Danes had received packages from the Red Cross and so were able to keep up their strength, and they also had food for the passage). The former captain found a lifeboat, but without oars. I don't know where they managed to find rope. They lashed the ferry to the boat, the Norwegians held up blankets with their arm like sails, and that improvised sailboat somehow towed the ferry toward the shore.

It was already light when the ferry ran aground a few hundred meters offshore. The Norwegians reached land in the lifeboat, secured the ferry with the rope, and we began to disembark. There was room for twenty people at most in the lifeboat, and they pulled it to land. A few people who could swim jumped into the water and swam ashore.

I was one of the first to get into the boat and a few minutes later I was safely ashore. We found a tap from which I drank real water. I ate some grass and other plants.

The boat continued to go back and forth between the ferry and the shore, until finally a few hundred people were brought to safety. Then a policeman came over and asked the kapo what was going on, and the kapo told him the whole story. The policeman went into a house and he must have phoned someone, because a few minutes later “our” SS men appeared, escorted by naval marines who were no more than children, they were even younger than me. They went aboard the ferry and started shooting everyone who was still on board. We saw people hanging over the side of the ferry. The Germans stepped on their fingers and they fell into the water. A few tried to jump off the ferry and get to shore but they were shot. Those who remained on board were thrown into the sea, but a few did manage to jump overboard and make it to land.

The Germans ordered us to line up in rows of ten. They took out those who had come out of the water, stood them in a group, and started to shoot them. They also pulled me out because I was short. I stood and waited indifferently for my turn. I wondered what part of me they would choose to shot. Now my end has come, I thought. Just a short time ago I thought the Germans had gone, that we were free, but that dream had quickly come to an end. Actually, I expected nothing but to be shot because I had no strength left. In my imagination I saw my corpse and I thought that it would be good to die. There were a few people ahead of me and I only looked into the accursed eyes [of the Germans] as they aimed their rifles.

Suddenly the thought flashed through my mind that maybe the war was really over, maybe someone from my family was still alive. And if my fate was sealed and I had to die by shooting. I would not let them choose what part of my body would be the target. I would decide that. I turned around and started to walk back to the row from which I had been removed. I waited for the bullet that would put an end to my life, but it was not fired. My back was taut in expectation of the bullet and I do not know why it did not come.

I took my place in the middle of the line and no one said a word.

The dead bodies lay in a heap on the beach next to us. Many bodies of those who had been shot floated in the shallow water by the shore.

The shooting stopped all at once. The SS men told the marines to hold their fire and ordered us to start marching. We walked for some time until we reached a sports field. The entire field was surrounded by guards. Pots containing soup were brought to the site. They called people according to order: *Reichsdeutschen* [Germans from the Reich], *Volksdeutschen* [ethnic Germans], Danes, Norwegians, Poles, etc. After everyone had received soup and it was our turn, the Jews' turn, they passed over us and began to dish out the leftovers according to the same order.

After they themselves had eaten their fill, they again ordered us to line up in rows of ten and led us to the port.

A few ships were anchored in the port. There was one enormous ship, the *Cap Arcona*, and thousands of *katzetniks* were on its deck. They crossed via a bridge, the other end of which was attached to the *Deutschland*, and we were brought to it from the port.

Suddenly British planes appeared above and circled over the ships. White long underwear were hoisted on the *Cap Arcona* as a sign of surrender. One of the planes flew low and circled the ship. Its pilot apparently saw that these were *katzetniks*. But just then the Germans returned to their anti-aircraft positions and opened fire at the plane. The swastika flag was raised again. The plane evaded the bullets and dropped a bomb on the ship, which burst into flames. People started jumping overboard to save themselves. It was an incredible sight. Thousands of people were in the water and grabbing for anything that floated. I saw something unimaginable: *Katzetniks* and an SS man were holding on the same board. The ship went up in flames and thousands of people were in the water like so many little dolls.

Suddenly we were ordered to return to the sport field. Again we lined up in rows of ten and began to march back to the field. We were about halfway there when raucous shouts of joy came from the group ahead of us and *katzetniks'* caps flew into the air. We saw a tank (it turned out to be British) pass by. We were liberated! People began to shout, laugh, and cry. Everyone expressed his joy in his own way. The SS men who had escorted us disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them. A sign that we were free.

We are standing in the middle of the road, still in rows of ten, and people are going completely wild. Some are kissing, others have collapsed on the ground from exhaustion. The rows disintegrate. The tank went by and nothing happened.

All of a sudden the escort reappeared and urged us on: "Forward!" Blows from rifle butts landed on our heads. We were ordered to "March again!" toward the sports field.

Was what just happened dream or reality? Were we all hallucinating? Did we really see a tank with a star on it and not a swastika, and soldiers waving at us and smiling?

The joy of liberation lasted only a few minutes. The shouts of the Germans and the jabs with the rifle butts brought us back to reality in less than an instant.

The beautiful dream faded as fast as it had come. We continued on our way to the sports field. A few of those who had fallen to the ground were no longer capable of getting up and asked the SS men to shoot them. But the Germans left them lying there and did not shoot them. At the same time, they urged us on even faster.

As we approached the sports field, tanks appeared one after another and our escort again vanished as though swallowed by the earth. Again we were left standing by ourselves in the middle of the road. This time we refused to believe that the moment of liberation had indeed arrived.

I felt I was dreaming when the realization that this was the real thing, this was the end, suddenly struck me. The question "Will I survive the war?" had finally been answered.

Source: Y. Kleiman and N. Springer- Aharoni (eds.), *The Anguish of Liberation- Testimonies from 1945*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1995 pp. 20-27